

Q1 2026 Pulse Check: The Food & Wellness Trends We're Hearing (and Seeing) Everywhere

These are the topics and trends that we believe will shape much of the food and wellness-related news and thought leadership in 2026.

-Megan Thomas of Ladder 17 & Megan Meyer, PhD, of No Scitation Needed

Impact of MAHA / New Dietary Guidelines

2025-230 DGA Increases Protein Recommendations. The guidelines now recommend 1.2 to 1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day, a substantial jump from the previous 0.8 grams per kilogram. For a 150-pound person, this translates to roughly 82-109 grams of protein daily and potentially doubles the previous recommendation.

- The guidelines emphasize "prioritizing protein foods at every meal" and include both animal sources (red meat, poultry, seafood, eggs) and plant sources (beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, soy).
- Critics note that the previous 0.8-gram recommendation was the minimum to prevent deficiency, not necessarily an optimal amount, though the scientific basis for the specific new range remains unclear. Additionally, some experts feel that plant-based protein sources did not receive adequate emphasis in the updated guidelines.
- Additionally, consumer data continues to show that Americans are seeking protein from both current and new food purchases.

Potential Impact: Companies that sell or are developing animal or plant-based protein products can capitalize on the public visibility on protein. This can be done through:

- Innovative **products** that deliver meaningful benefits
- **Positioning** and **messaging** protein-forward products for the current climate



Peptide Awareness Surges

Consumer interest in peptides has accelerated dramatically. What was once confined to bodybuilding forums and biohacking communities has entered mainstream wellness conversations, with peptides appearing in everything from skincare to recovery supplements to functional foods. The success of GLP-1 medications like Ozempic and Wegovy has served as a gateway, educating consumers about what peptides are and how they work, while simultaneously creating curiosity about other peptide-based solutions. This growing awareness presents both opportunity and risk. Informed consumers are seeking legitimate, science-backed peptide products from reputable sources, but the hype has also attracted opportunistic players making exaggerated claims.

Potential Impact: Brands that use the approaches below will be well-positioned to capture this expanding market:

- Rigorous **quality** standards
- **Transparent** sourcing
- **Evidence-based positioning**

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Focus on Longevity & Health Span

This topic is picking up momentum across the food and health & wellness sectors. This is being driven by significant scientific breakthroughs, a societal shift from lifespan extension to a focus on "health span" (living healthy for longer), an increase in aging populations, and technology advancements.



Potential Impact: New industry and stakeholder events, like MISTA's Growth Hack Series and the Milan Longevity Summit, are focused on emerging research and idea sharing on the topic. Forward-thinking brands with longevity-related products stand to gain by:

- Being visible at longevity **events**
- Engaging with the larger narrative around improved health span through **PR** or **thought leadership** efforts

Interested in leveraging these trends for your business? Contact megan@ladder17.com.

Continued Focus on Personalization in Consumer Products

This is a longer-term trend that continues to take hold with North American consumers. The ubiquity of smartphones, the growing availability of health and wellness information (and misinformation) via social media, and AI/machine learning are converging to create an "on-demand" environment for products and services that meet unique personal challenges or preferences.

Potential Impact: In the age of AI-generated content "slop," the brands that will win over consumer hearts and minds will deliver:

- Personalized **products**
- Authentic, customized, and low-friction **experiences** in both **digital and in-person spaces**

The Potential of AI to Speed up Market Entry for Innovative Products

There is heightened focus in both the CPG and the startup communities that innovative tech-enabled products are taking too long to get to market, or are stumbling once they get there. Although AI is an uber buzzy topic right now, there is a need to convene conversations about how AI, whether in product discovery or in the R&D process itself, will be an essential part of the products of the future.

Potential Impact: Companies should take a **longer term view** on how AI can be harnessed to drive both innovation and process improvement. In the media, conversations are **shifting beyond "AI in business"** to more **nuanced themes**; brands should have their own unique take when **pitching** and **speaking**.