

# Honoring Women's Contributions to the Field of Nutrition

written by Dr. Ronald Hoffman | March 11, 2021



This month marks the confluence of Women's History Month and National Nutrition Month.

Women have historically been ideally suited to advance the practice of nutrition via their traditional roles implementing healthy diet in the home, but they have also made outstanding contributions to nutrition science. So let's take this opportunity to acknowledge the achievements of some of the most influential female nutrition pioneers.

**Ellen Swallow Richards:** Considered to be the founder of the modern home economics movement, Richards sought to apply scientific rigor to the traditional arts of food preparation and household management. She was the first woman in America accepted to any school of science and technology, and the first American woman to obtain a degree in chemistry, which she earned from Vassar College in 1870. While it may sound kind of passé today in light of the modern feminist movement, Richards pioneered the view that it was a woman's highest calling to safeguard the health of her family by employing then-innovative concepts of sanitation and nutrition in the home. In the optimistic spirit of her time, she authored the influential text "Euthenics: the science of controllable environment" (1910). (You can read it here: [Works of Ellen Richards](#))

**Ellen G. White:** Known as the co-founder of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, White was a mid-nineteenth century advocate for the primacy of nutrition in advancing health. Although her staunch vegetarian views are controversial—and she's famed for linking diet to "sexual licentiousness"—nonetheless her influence has been profound and long-lasting. She was instrumental in the founding of Loma Linda University, which has been a leader in nutrition research. In her many writings on the subject of health, she inveighed against the dietary excesses of her time, counseling moderation. She was an early campaigner against the harmful effects of tobacco well before its health-impairing effects were medically acknowledged.

*Leyla Weighs In: The VERY Necessary Nutrition Consult*

**Elsie Widdowson:** Widdowson was a twentieth century British dietician and

nutritionist. She played a key role in supporting the health of UK individuals during the harsh World War II years, where rationing and food scarcity were commonplace. She was one of the first women to graduate from Imperial College, where she obtained a chemistry degree in 1928. Dr. Widdowson was among the first to advocate for the fortification of food, after personally subjecting herself to rigorous wartime experiments in nutrient restriction, and she collaborated in establishing standards for mandated addition of vitamins and minerals to foods in post-war Great Britain. She also performed pioneering research on nutritional rehabilitation of starved concentration camp survivors. Widdowson lived a long life, attaining the age of 94 while consuming a simple diet, including butter and eggs.

**Adele Davis:** For those of us who grew up in the Baby Boomer generation, Adele Davis was a ubiquitous presence on many of our parents' bookshelves. *Let's Cook It Right* (1947), *Let's Have Healthy Children* (1951), *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit* (1954), and *Let's Get Well* (1965) sold tens of millions of copies, and she was acclaimed by *Time Magazine* as "the high priestess of a new nutrition religion." She obtained a B.A. in household science at Berkeley in 1927 after graduating from Princeton in an era when women were scantily represented in the Ivy League. She subsequently earned a Ph.D. in nutrition from the University of Southern California. She was among the first to highlight the harmful effects of processed foods, and presciently decried the use of hydrogenated fat and sugar. Dr. Davis was famous for her advocacy of yeast and beef liver extract as sources of essential vitamins and minerals, and helped launch a nascent supplement and health food movement in the mid-twentieth century.

*Leyla Weighs In: In pursuit of instant gratification*

**Rachel Carson:** Though not strictly a nutritionist, Carson has had a profound influence on our viewpoints about organic foods and natural agriculture. In her revolutionary book *Silent Spring* (1962) Carson highlighted the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment. Originally trained as a marine biologist, Carson's work has been a rallying cry for the environmental movement and has spawned decades of research on the harmful effects of agricultural chemicals on human health.

**Mildred Seelig:** One of the founders of the American College of Nutrition, Dr. Seelig pioneered research on the essentiality of magnesium, and the pervasiveness of its deficiency in contemporary America. Over her 40-year career she authored scores of influential scientific papers and inspired and mentored a generation of contemporary nutrition scientists.

**Julia Child:** I include Julia Child here, not because she was a credentialed nutrition scientist, but rather because she undeniably had a profound influence on the dietary habits of Americans, expanding our nutrition horizons immeasurably. She inveighed against fat-phobia and encouraged experimentation with ingredients considered exotic by bland mid-twentieth century American standards. In later life, she recognized the need to accustom children's palates to a variety of wholesome, natural foods,

underwriting the development of “Days of Taste”, an initiative of the American Institute of Wine and Foods.

*Ask Leyla: Should I start drinking red wine for heart health?*

**Mary Enig:** A proponent of the ancestral diet, Dr. Enig was an outspoken critic of the Cholesterol Hypothesis, and challenged restrictions on consumption of saturated fats, while condemning trans-fats. She was a proponent of grass-fed meats and coconut oil, and teamed with Sally Fallon to write the popular *Nourishing Traditions: The Cookbook that Challenges Politically Correct Nutrition and the Diet Dictocrats Revised and Updated Edition* Paperback (1989).

**Gladys Kidd Jennings:** The granddaughter of slaves, in 1948 Dr. Jennings became the first African American woman and person of color to earn a master’s degree from Washington State University. The recipient of a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship in 1954, she conducted pioneering research on improving the dietary habits of Africans and African Americans. After retiring from active teaching in 1991, her philanthropy supported the development of the National Organization of Blacks in Dietetics and Nutrition (NOBIDAN).

**Frances Moore Lappé:** Author of *Diet for a Small Planet*, Lappé was among the first to link nutrition with environmental sustainability. She popularized protein combining to leverage the nutritional value of complementary sources of essential amino acids, and inveighed against the wastefulness and environmental devastation of factory meat production.

**Leyla Muedin, MS, RD, CDN:** Most of you know her, too, as the co-host of our weekly Q&A with Leyla podcast, author of newsletter articles, and host of her own weekly *Intelligent Medicine* podcast. Leyla has a passion for her chosen field of nutrition. She embarked on it as a second career, leaving a successful position in media to go back to school, first to become a Registered Dietician, then obtaining an advanced Master’s Degree. She landed a job with the late Dr. Robert Atkins, where she gained practical experience under his tutelage, implementing low-carb diets, and observing their benefits firsthand.

It was a daring career choice for a budding nutritionist because Atkins’ approach was then highly controversial. It went “against the grain” of her academic training, but Leyla stuck to her guns, and after Atkins died, she came to work with me.

Leyla has since been laser-focused on keeping abreast of the latest

developments in innovative nutritional science and functional medicine. She leverages her knowledge with a personable approach that helps clients overcome obstacles to lifestyle change. The results have been transformative for so many individuals who have regained their health via her practical advice.

She doesn't just talk the talk: She's a devotee of healthy eating, grows and prepares her own natural foods, and practices yoga and strength training. But she's modest about virtue-signaling over her healthy routine; she doesn't wield it like a badge of moral superiority. Leyla is a paragon of the many outstanding women who are now leading a revolution in the field of nutrition, and she deserves acknowledgment this month.

This list is by no means exhaustive, and I offer my apologies to the many women whose enormous contributions to the field of nutrition, past and present, I may have omitted—not to mention the rising cadre of female stars, too numerous to count, who are sure to carry the banner forward in future years. And I want to take a moment to recognize moms everywhere, who are the “Barefoot Doctors” on the frontlines of healthy diet implementation.