

**Dr. Walter Willett:**  
**Numerous Potential Conflicts of Interest**

**Summary:**

**Walter Willett, leader of the EAT-Lancet section on diet and health, has multiple serious potential conflicts of interest which cast doubt on his ability to bring an unbiased viewpoint to the question of whether a vegan/vegetarian diet is preferable for good health.**

**Principal findings:**

- Willett has advocated for a vegetarian diet, including little-to-no red meat consumption, since 1990/1991. In recent years, he has increasingly been leaning towards veganism.
- Willett has published more than 200 papers on epidemiological data (which can show association but cannot demonstrate cause-and-effect) with findings that 1) red meat is bad for health, 2) that animal fats are bad for health, and/or 3) that a diet of grains/fruits/vegetables or vegetarianism generally is better for health. He has also published three commercial diet books that make these same arguments.
- In the last few years of Willett's directorship of the Harvard T.S. Chan School of Public Health, the school received between \$455,000 and \$1,500,000 from companies or groups interested in promoting vegetarian products or the vegetarian diet generally. The school also received between \$350,000 and \$950,000 from pharmaceutical companies, which presumably would not benefit from a nutritional solution to chronic disease.
- Willett is an Advisor or Scientific Advisor to at least 7 groups/commercial enterprises that promote high-grain, vegetarian diets.
- Willett has been closely involved in numerous commercial ventures with David Katz, a prominent promoter of the vegetarian diet who has received millions from food companies.
- Willett rarely, if ever, discloses these potential conflicts of interest.

**Willett is the co-chair of the EAT-Lancet report, which does not disclose any of his potential conflicts of interest.**

**Willett is the principal nutritionist on the EAT-Lancet report. The other nutritionists on the paper have published almost nothing on the subject of diet and disease, and nothing that contradicts Willett's views.<sup>1</sup> Thus, on the subject of diet and health, the report presents only one viewpoint. This report cannot be considered a balanced paper.**

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<sup>1</sup> Other commissioners with nutrition-related publications are: 1) Anna Lartey , Professor and Director, Nutrition Division, FAO, who has studied maternal and infant health, an age group outside the scope of the report's "healthy diet;" 2) Francesco Branca, Director General, Nutrition for Health and Development, WHO, who has written mainly on policy and general overview papers (a specific topic of research interest for Branca is the potential benefits of soy-isoflavones, a plant-based product); 3) Srinath Reddy, Adjunct Professor of Epidemiology, Public Health Foundation of India, has written a handful of papers with positive findings for plant-based diets, cereals, snacks and mustard oil, compared to negative findings for animal products.

There are many scientists who do not believe that the plant-based diet is best for health. Indeed, the 2015 U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, which favored a vegetarian diet, nevertheless concluded in its report that the evidence for any disease-fighting powers of this diet was “limited”— the lowest rank given for available data.

**Potential ideological/intellectual conflicts of interest:**

**Willett has promoted vegetarian diets since at least 1990/1991.**

- “Moderate red meat intake is certainly better than large amounts, but **it’s quite possible that no red meat intake is even better,**” said Dr. Walter C. Willett (1990)<sup>2</sup>
- “Doctors Walter Willett and Frank Sacks, researchers at the Harvard School of Public health...told us that **vegetarianism is still the best way to go** for anybody who is serious about lean.” (1991)<sup>3</sup>
- “We suggest that Dr. Small and his colleagues enjoy **an occasional meatball** when the urge becomes irresistible, preferably with a glass of red zinfandel....Beyond our land of meat and potatoes, the world’s **vast array of vegetarian dishes** containing no cholesterol and little 16:0 and 14:0 fatty acids provides an eating adventure, between the occasional meatballs, that Americans are only beginning to explore.” Walter Willett, M.D., Dr.P.H. Harvard School of Public Health Boston, MA 02115 Frank M. Sacks, M.D. Harvard Medical School Boston, MA 02115 (Letter to the Editor, New England Journal of Medicine, Jan 10, 1991)
- “**Steak is no longer part of the Willett lexicon; he gave up red meat** after the colon cancer study....**The optimal diet**, he says, is the Mediterranean menu - plenty of fruits and vegetables, **very little meat or chicken.**”<sup>4</sup> (1993)
  - **Note:** the “colon cancer” study noted above concluded: “These prospective data provide evidence for the hypothesis that a diet high in saturated fat increases the risk of colorectal adenoma.” This is an epidemiological finding (which can show association but **not prove causation**) **only on saturated fat/low fiber, but these are in no way synonymous with red meat.** Also, the study was confined exclusively to male doctors and therefore could not be generalized to a larger population.<sup>5</sup>
- Dr. Walter Willett, chairman of the department of nutrition of Harvard’s School of Public Health, calls the book [A Teen’s Guide to Going Vegetarian] “**a sound guide** for teens in the dietary jungle of America.”<sup>6</sup> (1994)

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<sup>2</sup> Mike King, “Red Meat, Women’s Colon Cancer Risk Linked,” Atlanta Journal & Constitution, Dec. 13, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Op-Ed, Susan Trausch, “Best Way to Go,” Boston Globe, Jan. 18, 1991. Available online here:

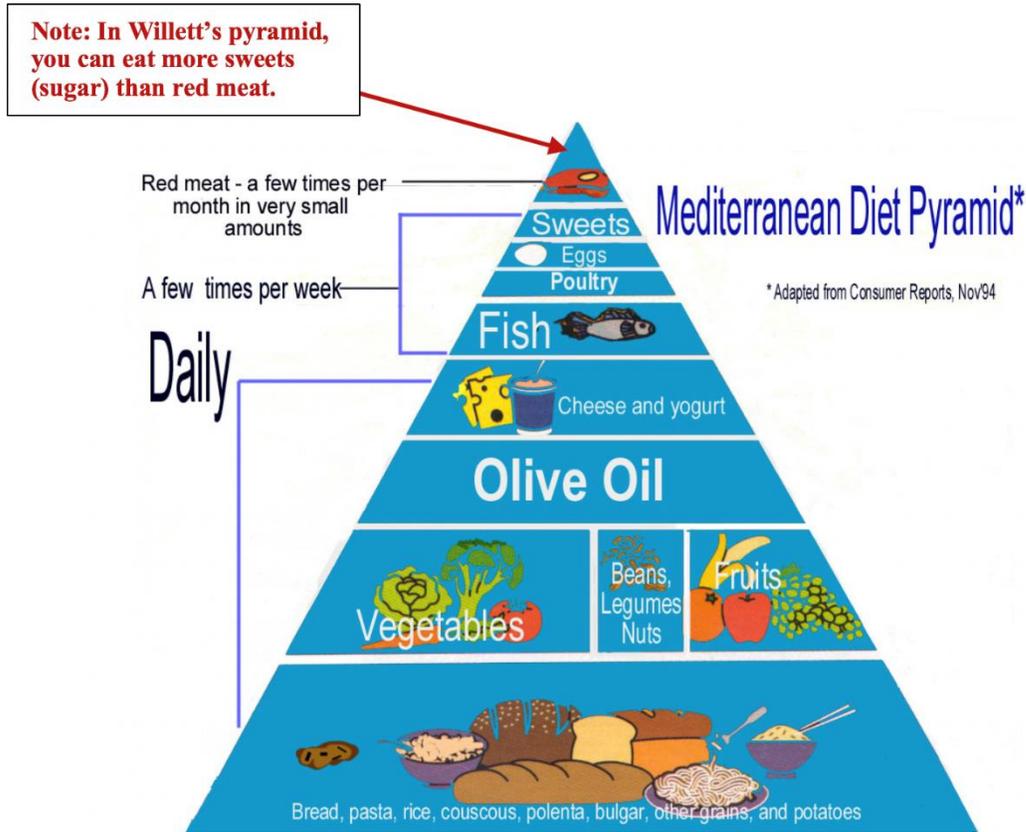
<https://www.scribd.com/document/397434585/Boston-Globe-Jan-18-1991>

<sup>4</sup> “The Myth Debunker: Harvard Researcher Probes into Whether We Are Getting the Right Information about Food,” Newsday, Dec. 29, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> J Natl Cancer Inst. 1992 Jan 15;84(2):91-8. (last accessed Jan. 10, 2019)

<sup>6</sup> John Nichols, “A Trend toward Vegetarianism,” (Madison, WI) Capital Times, Nov. 11, 1994.

- Willett published this pyramid in 1995, in conjunction with a food group called Oldways, see below.



- Willett said, “the optimum amount of red meat you eat should be zero.”<sup>7</sup> (2001)
- Willett [said](#), “The less red meat, the better. At most, it should be eaten only occasionally. And it may be maximally effective not to eat red meat at all.” (2001)
- Willett has been a featured speaker for conferences promoting vegetarian/vegan diets:
  - [The Third Annual Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition, 1999](#)
  - [The Ivy League Vegan Conference, 2017](#)

**Since 1983, Willett has published hundreds of papers concluding that fruits/vegetables and plant fats/proteins are healthy while animal fats/proteins/red meat are unhealthy. All of these papers are based on epidemiological data, which is fundamentally weak and cannot demonstrate “cause and effect.” Willett’s papers include:**<sup>8</sup>

- 78 findings that red meat is associated with a negative health outcome;

<sup>7</sup> Clay Evans, “Food, The Planet and You: John Robbins Elaborates on the Importance of Responsible Eating,” Boulder Daily Camera, Aug. 19, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> This data was determined by a review of studies listed on Pubmed.gov, last accessed Jan. 10, 2019.

- 37 findings that animal fats are associated with a negative outcome or that polyunsaturated vegetables are associated with a positive outcome. (Willet's writings are highly inconsistent on the question as to whether animal fats might be a possible reason for the negative health consequences he associates with red meat.)
- 130 findings that vegetarian or mostly-vegetarian diets are associated with a positive health outcome.<sup>9</sup>
- Willett is also the author of **three diet books** that advocate a largely vegetarian diet for health, weight loss, and fertility.

**Note: the quality of Willett's evidence base is fundamentally weak.**

- Epidemiological studies are a weak form of data that are meant to generate hypothesis, but not to prove them. They show associations and cannot, in the vast majority of cases, be used to demonstrate cause and effect. Only clinical trials, which are a far more rigorous kind of evidence, can demonstrate cause and effect.
- **Epidemiological findings in nutrition, when tested in rigorous clinical trials, have only been found to be correct only 0-20% of the time. This means, 80-100% of the time, they are wrong.**
- **Willett has never been able to confirm a biologically plausible *mechanism* by which red meat might cause ill health.** He rejects the idea that saturated fats are a possible reason. Other proposed mechanisms, such as excessive heme iron or TMAO, have never been demonstrated in human clinical trials to cause heart disease. Meat does not contain glucose, which is the driver of both obesity and type 2 diabetes. Thus, there remains no proven mechanism by which red meat might cause disease.

### **Conclusion:**

It seems clear, from the above information, that **Willett has, for nearly 30 years, had a strong intellectual bias in favor of the vegetarian/vegan diet.**

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<sup>9</sup> "Vegetarian or mostly-vegetarian diets" include vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains.

### **Potential Financial Conflicts of Interest:**

Willett and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH), which Willett chaired from 1991 to 2017, **each received numerous grants and funds from companies and other groups with an interest in promoting plant-based foods.**

- In 2013, Willett published a [study](#) funded by the International Tree Nut Nutrition and Research Foundation that found nut consumption reduced mortality.
- Between July 2016 and June 2017, the **Peanut Institute** [donated](#) between **\$250,000 and \$499,999** to the T.H. Chan School of Public Health. [The Peanut Institute](#) promotes the use of peanuts and peanut oil in diets.
- Between July 2017 and June 2018, California Walnut Commission [donated](#) between \$100,000 and \$249,000 to the T.H. Chan School of Public Health. This organization has been a donor for five or more consecutive years.
- Since March 2016, Willett has published **at least two studies that promote the use of walnuts or peanuts**. Willett declares “no conflict of interest” in these papers.
  - [“Associations between nut consumption and inflammatory biomarkers”](#)
  - [“Nut consumption and risk of colorectal cancer in women”](#)
  - Since July 2016, Willett and his colleagues have published **at least 6 papers** supporting the use of polyunsaturated fats, such as peanut oil, over saturated fats.<sup>10</sup>
- Unilever, long the world’s largest manufacturer of polyunsaturated vegetable oils (although the company recently sold off much of that business) has had numerous links to HSPH while researchers there have published papers supporting the use of polyunsaturated vegetable (or “plant”) oils to replace saturated fats.
  - A [2016 prominent paper](#) by Willett, with negative findings on saturated fats, was published with 7 other authors, three of whom were Unilever *employees* and one of whom was supported by a Unilever fellowship. A [Unilever document](#) boasts of this paper as one of “Our Nutrition Publications 2011-2016.”
  - Willett is [a collaborating member](#) on a fatty acid research project, called FORCE, funded mainly by [an “unrestricted grant by UNILEVER,”](#) directed by Dariush Mozaffarian, who from 2012 to approximately 2017 was a [member](#) of the Scientific Advisory Board of Unilever North America.
  - Willett co-authored with Mozaffarian:
    - A [paper](#) recommending that people “replace red meat with other protein sources” to avoid risk of stroke;
- The Izumi Foundation donated between **\$100,000 and \$249,000** to the [Chan school](#) between July 2017 and June 2018. The [Foundation](#) was “Created in 1998 by the lay

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<sup>10</sup> [Br J Cancer. 2016 Jul 26;115\(3\):371-4; JAMA Intern Med. 2016 Aug 1;176\(8\):1134-45; Am J Clin Nutr. 2016 Sep;104\(3\):722-8; BMJ. 2016 Nov 23;355:i5796; J Am Coll Cardiol. 2017 Nov 14;70\(20\):2519-2532; J Nutr. 2018 Nov 1;148\(11\):1821-1829\)](#)

Buddhist order Shinnyo-en.” Shinnyo-en is a branch of Sihingon, which is one of the Buddhist sects that [“encourages vegetarianism”](#) (but does not require it).

- The Environmental Defense Fund [donated](#) between **\$1,000 and \$99,000** to the School. The EDF urges people to [“Have a Meatless Monday.”](#)
- The Nature Conservancy [donated](#) between **\$1,000 and \$99,000**. [The conservancy says](#) the first way you can save water is to **“Eat Vegetarian (or Vegan) for the Day,”** and encourages people to eat less beef. [Mark Tereck](#), the **chief executive officer**, has said he **is a vegan**.
- [Another donor](#) of between **\$1,000 and \$99,000 is the World Health Organization**. [WHO recommends](#) that people eat “whole grains” for breakfast, that menus should include **“at least one plant-based, vegetarian option such as tofu or beans,”** and employers and cafeteria managers should **“serve plenty of vegetables to make it the main bulk of a meal.”**
- [Aramark](#) has provided unspecified matching gifts to the T.H. Chan School for Public Health from July 2017 through June 2018. An [Aramark press release](#) from August, 2017 stated that 30 percent of its main dishes “are vegan or vegetarian, and 10 percent feature whole grains as their main ingredient.” A company official said the firm will “continue to work towards offering **more plant-forward menu options** and alternate protein.” Aramark works with the Humane Society and participates in the Menus of Change program.
- Nature’s Touch Frozen Foods [donated](#) between **\$1,000 and \$99,000** to the school from 2017-2018. The [company sells](#) exclusively frozen fruits and vegetables.
- Nutrient Foods [donated](#) between **\$1,000 and \$99,000 from 2017-2018**. The company [sells](#) **vegetarian** shakes, bran shakes, cereal, oatmeal, hot rice cereal, “vitamin coffee,” bars, cookies, rice, noodles, and flavor packs.

**Pharmaceutical Donors;** It’s not clear why pharmaceutical donors would be giving money to a research institution devoted to improving health exclusively through *food*.

- Between July 2017 and June 2018 Merck & Company [donated](#) between **\$250,000 and \$499,000**.
- Burroughs Wellcome [donated](#) between **\$100,000 and \$249,000** from July 2017 through June 2018.
- Johnson & Johnson [donated](#) between **\$1,000 and \$99,000** from July 2017 and June 2018, and matching gifts.
- Pfizer [donated](#) between **\$1,000 and \$99,000** from July 2017 and June 2018.

- Genetech [provided](#) matching donations from July 2017 to June 2018.

### **Potential Conflicts of Interest due to Organizational Affiliations:**

(Note that scientific advisor positions are typically paid)

#### **Blue Zones**

- Willett is an [advisor](#) to the Blue Zones company. Blue Zones [sells a plant-based diet program](#) nation-wide.

#### **Menus of Change**

- Willett is scientific advisor to [Menus of Change](#), a group that promotes “plant forward” diets and “culinary innovations including **servicing meat as a condiment**” One of its [principles](#) is to “Serve less red meat, less often.”
  - A Menus of Change [summit](#) stressed “the (optional) **role of limited quantities of sustainably produced meat in our recipes, menus, and diets,**” and ways to change consumer “perceptions of **plant-forward menus and plant-based foods.**” The summit included a “**deep dive**” into menus that had “**minimal or significantly reduced** (1-2 ounce) **quantities of meat,** [and] pair ‘**meat as a condiment**’ with **plant protein.**”
  - In its [second annual report](#), Menus of Change recommended that people should read reports by **Willett** and said chefs should “**Think produce first,**” “**Serve less red meat,** less often,” “rethink how meat is used by featuring it in smaller, supporting roles to healthier **plant-based choices,** and **experimenting with meat as a condiment,**” emphasize **nuts,** and use **peanut oil.** The Peanut Institute is a [major donor](#) to the T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

#### **Oldways**

- Willett has been closely involved with the Boston-based Oldways since at least the early 1990s. In 2016, he was honored as being the scientist who had, among other things, [inherited the mantel of Ancel Keys](#) who is considered the father of the “Mediterranean Diet.”



In 2017, Willett [was honored as an Oldways “Local Hero”](#) for being “a long-time friend and collaborator.

- Willett [currently serves on Advisory Board](#) for Oldways’ “Vegetarian Diet” group and, together with his wife, on the Advisory Board for the “African Heritage” group.
- Together with David Katz, Willett co-chaired [a scientific consensus committee](#) which concluded that “a healthy dietary pattern is higher in vegetables, fruits, whole grains,” and “lower in red and processed meats.” The consensus statement was presented in 2015 at a scientific and media conference.
- Oldways is [funded by an enormous number of food companies](#), the vast majority of which are producers of plant-based products: a2 Milk Company, Agora Foods International, Al Wadi Al Akhdar, Almond Board of California, American Pulse Association, Ana Sortun CHEF SET, Arctic Apples, Arrowhead Mills, Aryzta North America, Attune Foods, Inc, B&G Foods, Barbara's Bakery, Bard Valley Medjool Dates, Barilla, belVita, Better 4U Foods (which makes private label foods), Bimbo Bakeries, Bob's Red Mill, California Almonds, California Avocado Commission, California Walnut Commission, California Wild Rice Advisory Board, Canada Bread, Canned Food Alliance, Cans Get You Cooking, Chicken of the Sea, Continental Mills (makers of pancakes, muffins and other carb-rich foods), Del Monte Foods, Divina (FOODMatch, Inc.), Dole, Dole Nutrition Institute, Dr. Schar USA, Inc., Egg Nutrition Center, Farmer Direct Foods (maker of wheat and flour), Fleischmann's Yeast, Flourish Baking Company, Flowers Foods, Foodmatch Inc., Freedom Foods, Frito Lay, Gaea North America, General Mills, General Mills Bell Institute of Health, Nutrition & Food Safety, Giorgio Foods, Grecian Delight, Grupo Bimbo, Hain Celestial Group, Hass Avocado Board, Healthy Aisles, Hodgson Mill, Home Free Treats, International Collection, J.M. Smucker Company, Kamut Association, Kellogg, KIND, Lesaffre Yeast, Loliva, Lotus Foods ( maker of rice), Meal Makeover Moms, Meatless Monday, Mediterra, Mission Foods, Mondelez International, Montana Flour & Grains, Mooney Farms, Mooney Farms - Bella Sun Luci, Mushroom Council, Nabisco, National Fisheries Institute, National Onion Association, National Pasta Association/Pasta Fits, National Watermelon Promotion Board, Nature's Path (makers of all-grain foods), Nestlé, North American Olive Oil Association, Oldways, Pamela's Products, Pasta Fits, Peanut Institute, Pepperidge Farm, Pinnacle Foods Group, POM, Post Consumer Brands, Produce for Better Health Foundation, Quaker Oats, Riviana (America’s leading rice producer), Roman Meal, Safest Choice Pasteurized Eggs, Safeway, Seafood Nutrition Partnership, siggi's dairy, Silk (a maker of soy and almond milk), Simply Sesame, Snyder's of Hanover, Soyfoods Association of North America, SPINS, Splenda, StarKist Company, Subway, Sun-Maid, Sunnyland Mills (makers of bulgur wheat products), TreeHouse Foods, Tyson Foods, U.S.A. Pears, Uncle Ben's, Unilever, United Sorghum Checkoff, United States Potato Board, US Highbush Blueberry Council, USA Rice Federation, Veggiecation, Vestcom, Vitaspelt Nature's Legacy, Walmart Foundation, Westbrae Natural

### **True Health Initiative**

- Willett is on the [board of directors](#) of the [True Health Initiative](#), an advocacy group directed by David Katz that **promotes** “a diet comprised mostly of minimally processed, generally **plant-predominant foods.**”

### **Diet ID / DQPN**

- [Willett is a scientific advisor to Diet ID](#), a company that produces a digital dietary assessment tool. The founder and CEO of the company, David Katz, is a prominent promoter of the vegetarian diet (see True Health Initiative). The majority of other scientific advisors also promote/favor the vegan/vegetarian diet, including Harvard’s Frank Hu, Toronto professor David Jenkins ([Jenkins has said](#), “if it were up to him, he would have everyone embrace a vegan diet”) and Tuft’s Michael Dansinger, with whom Willett collaborates on other vegetarian-promoting efforts.

### **American College of Lifestyle Medicine**

- Willett serves on the [Board of Advisors of the American College of Lifestyle Medicine](#), a group that is dominated by vegans and vegetarians such as Dean Ornish, David Jenkins and David Katz (a past president). At least 4 members of the group's board of directors have been trained at [Loma Linda University](#), an institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church which includes the practice of vegetarianism as part of its religious beliefs.

### **International Carbohydrate Quality Consortium**

- Willett organized and co-chaired a conference together with fellow vegan/vegetarian David Jenkins on the [benefits of carbohydrates](#). The conference was [sponsored](#) by Abbott Lab, Arla, [Barilla](#), the Bell Institute of Health and Nutrition, the Bene Institute, the European Fruit Juice Association (AIJN), GI Labs, Ingredion, Nestlé Research Center, Pulse Canada, and Tate Lyle.

### **Willett does not generally disclose his conflicts of interest in his papers or his books, despite clear requirements, by granting agencies and publishers that require these disclosures.**

- Willett rarely, if ever, discloses the conflicts of interest listed above in his academic papers.
- Willett has published 13 papers for Cambridge University Press, some of which promote the consumption of vegetables.<sup>11</sup> Cambridge University Press requires authors to [state conflicts of interest](#) that are “a **result of personal relationships**, academic competition,

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<sup>11</sup> Walter C. Willett, [The Mediterranean diet: science and practice](#), (published online Jan. 2, 2007); Marjorie L. McCullough, Walter C. Willett, [Evaluating adherence to recommended diets in adults: the Alternate Healthy Eating Index](#) (published online Jan. 2, 2007); Stefka Petrova, Plamen Dimitrov, Walter C. Willett, Hannia Campos, [The global availability of n-3 fatty acids](#) (published online Mar. 31, 2011); Jinnie J Rhee, Eunyoung Cho, Walter C Willett, [Energy adjustment of nutrient intakes is preferable to adjustment using body weight and physical activity in epidemiological analyses](#) (published online May 23, 2013); Maria Teresa A. Olinto, Walter C. Willett, Denise P. Gigante, Cesar G. Victora, [Sociodemographic and lifestyle characteristics in relation to dietary patterns among young Brazilian adults](#) (published online Jun. 25, 2010); Tanya GK Bentley, Milton C Weinstein, Walter C Willett, Karen M Kuntz, [A cost-effectiveness analysis of folic acid fortification policy in the United States](#) (published online Apr. 1, 2009); Sheryl L Rifas-Shiman, Walter C Willett, Rebecca Lobb, Jamie Kotch, Charles Dart, Matthew W Gillman, [PrimeScreen, a brief dietary screening tool: reproducibility and comparability with both a longer food frequency questionnaire and biomarkers](#) (published online Sep. 27, 2007); Michael W Long, Cindy W Leung, Lilian WY Cheung, Susan J Blumenthal, Walter C Willett, [Public support for policies to improve the nutritional impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) (published online Dec. 6, 2012); Timothy J Key, Arthur Schatzkin, Walter C Willett, Naomi E Allen, Elizabeth A Spencer, Ruth C Travis, [Diet, nutrition and the prevention of cancer](#) (published online Jan. 2, 2007); Joo Young Lee, Hyeon Chang Kim, Changsoo Kim, Keeho Park, Song Vogue Ahn, Dae Ryong Kang, Kay-Tee Khaw, Walter C Willett, Il Suh, [Underweight and mortality](#) (published online Oct. 15, 2015); Susan J Blumenthal, Elena E Hoffnagle, Cindy W Leung, Hayley Lofink, Helen H Jensen, Susan B Foerster, Lilian WY Cheung, Marion Nestle, Walter C Willett, [Strategies to improve the dietary quality of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) beneficiaries: an assessment of stakeholder opinions](#) (published online Nov. 8, 2013); Kaumudi J Joshipura, Hsin-Chia Hung, Tricia Y Li, Frank B Hu, Eric B Rimm, Meir J Stampfer, Graham Colditz, Walter C Willett, [Intakes of fruits, vegetables and carbohydrate and the risk of CVD](#) (published online Jan. 1, 2009); Michelle D Holmes, Shona Dalal, Vikash Sewram, Megan B Diamond, Sally N Adebamowo, Ikeoluwapo O Ajayi, Clement Adebamowo, Faraja S Chiwanga, Marina Njelekela, Carien Laurence, Jimmy Volmink, Francis Bajunirwe, Joan Nankya-Mutyoba, David Guwatudde, Todd G Reid, Walter C Willett, Hans-Olov Adami, Teresa T Fung, [Consumption of processed food dietary patterns in four African populations](#) (published online Feb. 1, 2008).

political, **ideological**, religious, or scientific **preconceptions**, and **organizational or institutional affiliations**.” In none of his papers does Willett state that he has any conflict of interest.