



The sweet spot for health and taste

Research has been undertaken at **TEAGASC** in conjunction with UCC to determine how the healthier food choice can be made not only the easier choice but the tastier choice for consumers.

Some researchers report that we make over 200 food decisions every day, highlighting that eating and drinking are among the most frequent of daily human behaviours. In order to understand or try to influence food choice decisions and behaviours, attitudes and motivations underpinning such behaviours must be explored and understood. Previous research has shown that the development of food-based dietary guidelines to positively influence food choice should be culturally appropriate and based on existing food behaviours. However, these guidelines frequently fail to fully account for the impact of the most salient attitudes and motivations influencing food consumption behaviour. The aim of this research was to determine the impact of food choice attitudes and motivations on dietary behaviour and to demonstrate how this evidence can be used to inform dietary guidelines as well as new product development. Data from the National Adult Nutrition Survey (NANS) were used. NANS is an extensive study on the food and beverage consumption of Irish adults, including anthropometric measurements, socio-demographic and lifestyle data, and physical activity. Additionally, as part of the survey, dietary attitudes and motivations were measured using a food choice questionnaire.

Motivations, attitudes and behaviour

Analysis of motivations and attitudes alongside the behavioural measure of food intake has shown that taste is the most

important food choice motive for consumers, followed by health and nutrition. Taste was a more important food choice motivation for men compared to women and for younger compared to older consumers. In addition, those who rank taste and other motivations such as cost and convenience high in importance have different behaviours in relation to the amount of foods consumed compared to those who assign a higher ranking of importance to health and nutrition. Consumers motivated by health, for example, consumed higher amounts of dairy, cereal, and fruit and vegetables compared to those who placed lower importance on health.

Table 1 shows the differences in energy intake, fat as a percentage of energy, body mass index (BMI), and fruit and vegetable intake across the ranking of various motivations. Fat intakes (as a percentage of overall energy consumed) were higher in those who place high importance on taste. BMI was lower and achievement of dietary guidelines such as fruit and vegetable consumption was higher in those placing a higher ranking importance on nutrition. Ranking cost highly as a motivation for food choice was associated with a higher BMI and lower fruit and vegetable consumption, and overall lower compliance with dietary guidelines. Younger consumers and men were motivated to choose foods based on the sensory (taste) and convenience attributes of the foods.

Table 1: Food choice motives, consumption patterns and BMI in Irish consumers.

	Energy intake (kcal/day)	Energy from fat (%)	BMI (kg/m ²)	Fruit and vegetables (g/day)
Taste				
Ranked 1st/2nd	2,104	35	26.8	250
Ranked ≥ 3rd	1,974	34	27	280
Health				
Ranked 1st/2nd	2,024	34	26.6	311
Ranked ≥ 3rd	2,058	35	27.1	233
Nutrition				
Ranked 1st/2nd	2,017	34	26.4	312
Ranked ≥ 3rd	2,063	35	27.2	232
Cost				
Ranked 1st/2nd	2,052	35	28.1	202
Ranked ≥ 3rd	2,043	34	26.6	280
Convenience				
Ranked 1st/2nd	2,059	35	27.4	210
Ranked ≥ 3rd	2,040	34	26.7	279

Values in **bold** are significantly different at $P < 0.05$

Healthy food products should account for convenience and taste as the primary drivers of food choice and promote the sensory aspects of healthy food choice.

Relevance to consumer products

These findings have implications for the promotion of products to different consumer segments in order to achieve higher compliance with dietary guidelines and improved health outcomes. For example, targeting the younger male segment would benefit from focusing on taste and convenience as core product attributes when promoting healthy foods, with less emphasis placed on the health attributes. However, a different approach is required for older female consumers, whose food choices are more frequently guided by health, nutrition and taste. Products targeted at this segment should seek to support their pre-existing health orientation.

Food industry and public health

This research highlights a potential opportunity for negotiation and collaboration between the food industry and public health bodies. Public health bodies and food companies can mutually benefit from incentives and supports to promote healthy products in a targeted and evidence-based manner.

Hence, the promotion of healthy eating guidelines and healthy food products should account for convenience and taste as the primary driver of food choice and promote the sensory aspects of healthy food choice rather than just the health attributes. Products and guidelines promoted in this manner may have a higher likelihood of having the desired impact, i.e., healthier food consumption patterns in all consumers.

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