

The challenge of translating nutrition research into public health nutrition, University College, Dublin, 18–20 June 2008

An investigation of Irish consumers' and dietitians' knowledge, attitudes and practice in relation to functional foods

J. Morrissey¹, C. Corish² and A. McKeivitt³

¹Virtual School, School of Biomedical Science, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Co. Derry BT52 1SA, UK, ²School of Biological Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, Kevin Street, Dublin 8, Republic of Ireland and ³School of Biomedical Science, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Co. Derry BT52 1SA, UK

Diet is an important determinant of the incidence of many non-communicable chronic diseases. A focus on food's potential to promote health is now evident with the development of functional foods (FF)⁽¹⁾. However, a considerable amount of confusion exists in this area⁽²⁾. The present study aimed to explore similarities and differences between Irish consumers' and dietitians' knowledge, attitudes and practice in relation to FF.

Two twenty-one-item structured questionnaires were devised, piloted and administered to consumers and dietitians. Of 436 consumers in nine supermarkets nationwide invited to complete an interview-assisted questionnaire throughout the shopping day and week, 200 agreed. All 500 Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute members were sent a self-completion postal questionnaire, 302 of which were returned to the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute via self-addressed stamped envelopes.

Significantly more dietitians (89.5%) than consumers (63.3%) knew that consumption of a specific amount of FF is required to gain a health benefit ($P < 0.001$). Few respondents thought FF could be used instead of a healthy diet; however, more consumers than dietitians believed that all FF were suitable for all age-groups ($P < 0.001$). Dietitians qualified for a shorter length of time were more confident in recommending products claiming to improve heart health and digestion ($P = 0.009$).

Functional foods were used to a similar extent by the two groups (consumers, 54.4%; dietitians, 54.6%), with both groups mainly consuming FF 'for general health' rather than for medical conditions.

Table. Consumers' and dietitians' reasons for consumption of FF products

| Reason | Consumers (n 200) | | Dietitians (n 302) | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------|--------------------|------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Diagnosed medical condition | 33 | 30.6 | 19 | 11.7 |
| Like the taste | 9 | 8.2 | 24 | 14.7 |
| On special offer | 4 | 3.5 | 2 | 1.2 |
| For general health | 48 | 43.5 | 116 | 71.2 |
| Saw advertising | 4 | 3.5 | 0 | 0 |
| To prevent bad health | 10 | 9.4 | 2 | 1.2 |
| Other | 1 | 1.2 | 0 | 0 |

Products claiming to improve digestion were used by the greatest number of consumers (46.0%) and dietitians (60.0%). 'Improve digestion' and 'lower cholesterol' were the health claims most believed by consumers (32.3%) and dietitians (88.7%) respectively. Dietitians were most likely to advise (69.1%) and feel confident in recommending (80.3%) cholesterol-lowering products to clients.

As expected, knowledge about FF was significantly less in the consumer group; however, similar perceptions and use of FF was observed among consumers and dietitians.

1. Hasler CM (2002) *J Nutr* **132**, 3772–3781.

2. McConnon A, Fletcher PL, Cade JE, Greenwood DC & Pearman AD (2004) *Nutr Bull* **29**, 11–18.