

# **Young People and Food: Adolescent Dietary Beliefs and Understandings**

Research Summary



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## *Research Summary*



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## Overview of the research

The aim of this study is to contribute to the development of an effective food risk communications strategy directed at young people. From the outset the project recognised the interdependence of young people's understandings of healthy eating behaviour and their perceptions of the risks associated with food and dietary behaviours. Consequently, the various stages of the research aimed to establish a baseline understanding of young people's knowledge of food related issues and beliefs as well as their reported dietary behaviour. From this baseline, the various potential barriers to long-term healthy eating and factors affecting the reception of food risk communications were elucidated. This allowed the delineation of possible pathways that may promote a healthy diet in this population as well as identifying possible avenues of influence for food risk communications. Finally, we examined how different presentations of food risk communications, relating to snacking behaviour, were evaluated by young people.

## Methodology

This two year study involved a total of 5000 adolescents aged 12-17 sampled from over 80 schools across the island of Ireland. Three methods were employed in the study:

1. Twelve focus groups were employed to map out the complex ways in which young people understand nutritional issues and food risks. The open-ended discussions encouraged participants to volunteer the various considerations they take into account in their everyday dietary behaviour as well as assessing their level of knowledge on key food related issues.
2. The survey was conducted on 3436 randomly selected adolescents from 80 schools across the island of Ireland. The age of participants ranged from 12 to 18, with an average of 15 years of age. 1305 respondents attended school in Northern Ireland and 2131 were recruited from schools in the Republic. As a result of different proportions of boys and girls in single sex education, our sampling strategy recruited 1290 boys and 2107 girls.
3. Two experimental studies were conducted on a strategic sample of over 1300 adolescents across both regions. Snacking behaviour was chosen as a topic familiar to adolescents and one which is within the realm of their control. Participants were given one of a number of dietary communications about snacking embedded in a questionnaire of pre- and post- measures of dietary attitudes and beliefs. Communications either encouraged or discouraged snacking behaviour; contained advice that varied in the certainty surrounding the benefits or costs of snacking; and reported how stable scientific advice had been on snacking behaviour over time. This allowed us to look at the impact of these factors on young peoples' perceptions and beliefs.

## Main Findings

### 1. Variations in reported diet

Using a self-report measure<sup>1</sup> of the frequency with which specific foods were consumed, several patterns of variation in eating behaviour were noted across the sample. Girls reported a more healthy diet than did boys; adolescents from more affluent backgrounds reported a better diet and respondents from the Republic of Ireland reported a better diet than their Northern Ireland counterparts. Furthermore, adolescents' evaluations of their own diet as healthy or unhealthy matched a measure of current eating behaviour.

*Core finding one: Adolescents' diets vary across population subgroups*

Implication: Adolescents are not a homogeneous group. Profiling the sections of the population most vulnerable to health risks may enable a more effective delivery of dietary information.

### 2. Variations in reported knowledge

From the focus groups, most participants had a broad understanding of the dietary practices recommended by experts. In particular, respondents displayed a good knowledge of the health risks associated with over-consumption of particular foods. Using a nutritional knowledge questionnaire in the survey, we found a range of knowledge levels across the population. Girls showed greater nutritional knowledge than boys which could be taken as an explanation of their better reported diet. However, those from more affluent families did not show any higher knowledge levels and respondents from Northern Ireland had much greater knowledge levels in spite of their poorer reported diet.

*Core finding two: Although adolescents are aware of expert opinion as to the benefits and risks of dietary behaviour, this does not translate into healthier eating behaviour.*

Implication: As higher levels of knowledge of expert opinion alone do not have a substantial effect on health of diet, education programmes alone are unlikely to substantially change eating behaviour. Focusing on topics which are particular to adolescent everyday life is more likely to have an impact.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the World Health Organisation's 'Health Behaviour among School-aged Children' surveys

### 3. Young people's reasons for food choices

When looking at young people's reasons for food choices, taste and other sensory qualities of food were the primary determinants of choice rather than knowledge of expert opinion. The majority of adolescents reported a preference for energy dense foods such as fast food and sweets on this basis. Often, more micro-nutrient rich foods were reported as undesirable on the basis that they had bland or unpleasant tastes.

This distinction between tasty and tasteless or unpleasant tasting foods was accompanied by a classification of the former as bad or bad for you and the latter as good or good for you. In other words, adolescents themselves were of the opinion that the tasty energy dense foods they preferred were inherently bad and likewise any foods that were considered to be good for you would not be tasty. In turn, the idea that some foods are inherently good or bad meant that few adolescents had an understanding that all foods were acceptable as part of a well-balanced diet.

*Core finding three: Adolescents' oversimplified understanding of food may constitute a barrier to healthy eating.*

Implication: Challenging young people to engage with more complex representations of their diet and food risks should enable them to better link abstract dietary information and practical experience.

### 4. Food and self perceptions among adolescents

Another consequence of perceiving desired foods as inherently bad is that adolescents generally have a rather negative view of their own dietary practices. Even those who reported a relatively healthy diet saw themselves as unhealthy eaters because they sometimes consumed 'bad' foods. This negative self perception was reflected in a poor sense of control over their diet and the opinion that the move from home would inevitably result in a poorer diet.

For those that do see themselves as healthy eaters, this is often associated with a healthier lifestyle and an active involvement in food selection and preparation. These adolescents see themselves as more in control of their diet and confident in their ability to responsibly maintain a health diet outside of parental control. Healthy eaters also reported high levels of nutrition motivation in selection of foods and lower levels of convenience motivation.

*Core finding four: the role of self concept within the social context of adolescence is an important influence on dietary behaviour.*

Implications: Adolescents have a set of concerns and self concepts characteristic of their particular life-stage and distinct from those of children or adults. Dietary communications should be targeted at adolescents as adolescents.

Targeting the self-concept of adolescents by asking them to think more about the 'type of eater' they are could provide the means to enhance or challenge eating identities.

### 5. Body image and dieting

The findings above all relate to the consequences of preferences for particular types of foods. The second main set of considerations that adolescents reported as influencing diet was in relation to weight control. Obesity was viewed extremely negatively and weight control was associated with self esteem and attractiveness. Weight control concerns are heavily gendered with girls reporting much more concern than boys. Weight control measures are also gendered with boys reporting a preference for exercise and girls for dietary regulation. Although young people generally associate dietary regulation with health risks, some girls did report engaging in dietary regulation.

Respondents who identified as overweight reported less control over their diets and also reported being more motivated by weight control than nutrition in their selection of foods. This emerged specifically in relation to body image in the survey. For girls who wish to have a thinner figure, weight control issues are elevated at the expense of nutritional concerns.

*Core finding five: For some adolescents, concerns about obesity appear to lead to food being selected on the basis of weight control rather than nutritional motivation.*

Implications: Dietary communications which emphasise the negative consequences of obesity rather than the positive effects of healthy eating could potentially have a negative impact upon the diet of young people.

## 6. Food risks

As with the issues of healthy eating and dieting, adolescents displayed a variety of levels of knowledge of expert opinion of food risks such as food poisoning and pesticides. However, these considerations did not appear to play a major role in adolescents' own dietary behaviour. Rather, adolescents take a range of information sources into account. Parental and peer opinion ranked highly in participants' talk of food risks as did personal experience. Reported media influence on dietary behaviour was much lower than parental or peer influence and boys reported lower levels of influence than girls. Overall, adolescents do not appear to evaluate food risk communications in isolation, but judge them against this background knowledge.

Moreover, adolescents report employing a range of evaluative heuristics when encountering new dietary information. Characteristics of the data source and the form of the communication as well as the message itself are taken into consideration when making judgements as to the veracity and relevance of the communication.

*Core finding six: Adolescents are not passive information processors but actively interpret new information against the background of their previous knowledge.*

Implication: Communicators need to take into account how their message fits with adolescents' common-sense understandings of food risks as well as how they are likely to receive message characteristics.

## 7. Uncertainty and debate surrounding food risks

There appear to be different interpretations of the relevance and urgency of different types of food risks. Adolescents perceive natural food risks such as saturated fats and sugars as more threatening and relevant to their everyday lives than artificial ones. More generally, young people seem familiar with the concept of uncertainty and debate around food risks, although this familiarity does not appear to equate with complacency. Specifically in relation to artificial risks, adolescents associate greater disagreement with a greater likelihood of threat to health from these sources.

*Core finding seven: Adolescents have different opinions about different food risks and the threats of expert uncertainty concerning these risks.*

Implications: Communicators need to tailor the communication to adolescents' understandings of particular food risks and consider the specific effects of conveying uncertainty about each topic.

## 8. The impact of aspects of dietary risk communications

Furthermore, the experimental manipulations suggest that the level of certainty in dietary communications does have an effect upon adolescents' perceptions. Specifically, uncertain information has a similar effect on the perceptions of the likelihood of health risks as does information stressing negative health consequences. However, information about the stability of scientific opinion over time does not appear to have an effect.

*Core finding eight: Messages conveying uncertainty may be perceived in the same manner as those conveying certain health costs.*

Implications:

Complexity and two-sidedness of food risk information can be conveyed without loss of impact.

## Summary

An overall conclusion from the research is that adolescents as a population group have a very distinctive profile of attitudes and concerns in relation to dietary behaviour. Adolescence is the life stage during which the knowledge and motivations necessary to enable a healthy balanced diet need to be developed. However, knowledge of the risks of unhealthy diet is not the only factor affecting adolescent dietary motivations and food choices. While knowledge of experts' opinions of various food risks is an aspect of adolescents' understandings of healthy eating behaviour, this forms only one part of the wider range of factors that impact upon their dietary health. Social norms and pressures concerning dietary behaviour and body image constitute one set of factors while food preferences and motivations provide another. This is reflected in the complexity of adolescents' perceptions of these issues. Young people report a wide range of influences on their opinions, from personal experience to parents and peers to media sources. At the same time, they are not passive receivers of these multiple influences but actively employ sophisticated evaluations when encountering new dietary information. This means that dietary information targeted at young people needs to address their pre-existing knowledge and opinions of the particular food topic as well as present the information in a way that adolescents find engaging and convincing.

As well as outlining how adolescents' think about food and diet, the findings from the project will help **safefood** better design dietary communications directed at young people by: targeting specific populations groups who are vulnerable to poor dietary health; addressing these groups' own interests, concerns and motivations in relation to food choice and dietary behaviour; efficiently and effectively communicating the information necessary for these young people to make informed dietary decisions.

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