

Consumers knowledge, attitudes and behavior with respect to consuming dietary fats and oils

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The challenge of changing dietary behavior to reduce the risk of chronic disease has become increasingly compelling to health professionals and nutrition educators. Consumers require specific nutrition information to be able to implement dietary advice.¹ Frequent nutrition information that is given to consumers is too technical or ambiguous, and is easily misunderstood. This has been demonstrated with the difficulty that consumers experience trying to interpret information that is given on food labels, for example the meaning of the term 'light' as used with fats and oils.²

Consumers' nutrition knowledge levels about dietary fats and oils have been found to be generally poor. This presents a challenge to nutrition educators when trying to implement the current recommendations to encourage an increase in the consumption of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats and oils. The aims of this study were to investigate consumer knowledge about the health benefits of consuming unsaturated fats, types of fats consumed and possible barriers to changing dietary fat consumption and consumer perceptions about the reliability and acceptability of nutrition information relating to dietary fats and oils.

Consumers, from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, were surveyed outside of supermarkets (n=196) and at doctors surgeries (n=97). Survey items assessed consumers dietary behavior regarding fats and oils, consumers knowledge on fats and oils, consumers dietary fats and oils intake and consumers attitudes about dietary fat and oils.

While 71% of consumers surveyed initially reported that they had adequate knowledge about the types of fats and oils to consume for a healthy diet, it was subsequently found that over half (51%) did not know about the health benefits of consuming unsaturated fats. The lack of knowledge was explained by 58% of consumers who reported that a major barrier to choosing healthier fats and oils was the difficulty in understanding dietary information about fat and its effect on their health. Cost was reported as being the most important influence on consumers' choice of the types of fats and oils consumed (36%).

The results from the survey indicate that consumers require user friendly information to improve their knowledge about the types of fats and oils to consume for a healthy diet.

1. Levy AS, Fein SB, Stephenson M. Nutrition knowledge levels about dietary fats and cholesterol. *Journal of Nutrition Education* 1983-1988; 25:60-66.
2. Munro IA, Vermer A, Wolters I. The 1995 Code of Practice on nutrient claims in food labels: consumer knowledge and producer compliance. *Journal of the Home Economics Institute of Australia* 1996; 3:6-12.