

## Diet and educational level in Tasmania

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Socio-demographic gradients in diet have not been extensively explored in Australia. This data presented here are from a study that explored education gradients in diet, and are based on consumption frequencies for selected food items.

Subjects were chosen by systematic sampling of the Tasmanian electoral rolls, and were mailed a 5-page printed questionnaire, seeking dietary data and some background demographics. Of 800 people approached state-wide, 433 responded, resulting in a response rate of 54%. The data presented here were obtained by a food-frequency questionnaire, which included eight cereal items, 10 fruit and vegetable items, nine dairy and related items, 13 meat and related items, and six miscellaneous items. There were two questions on education, which we have combined to characterise education as 'low' (left school without completing year 10), 'high' (completed a degree), or 'intermediate' (all others).

For the analyses here, binary logistic regression was used. The dependent variable was consumption frequency, re-coded as 'low' (consumed up to once per week) or 'high' (more than once a week). Predictor variables were sex, age-group (up to 49 yr; 50 yr and over), and education (low, intermediate, high – as defined above). The education coefficients discussed here were obtained from analyses in which all three predictors were entered simultaneously into the equations, so as to adjust for sex and age variations in educational level.

Of the 46 foods tested, 11 had statistically significant ( $P < 0.05$ ) education coefficients in their regression equation. Nine showed a significant increase in consumption frequency with higher education: wholemeal bread, garlic, bacon, nuts and wine, breakfast cereals, broccoli, cheese and salmon. Two showed a significant decrease in consumption frequency with higher education: white bread, boiled/baked potatoes. The remaining 35 foods did not show significant education coefficients; these included butter, salami, sausages, cream, cakes, sweet pastries, savoury pastries, most of the fruit and vegetable items, and most of the fish items.

Some of these consumption trends could be viewed as indicating a greater emphasis on health among the more-educated: e.g., their greater consumption frequency for wholemeal bread, broccoli, garlic and salmon. However, for most of the foods studied, the education coefficients do not support such an interpretation. We conclude that people of different educational levels do not differ markedly in the emphasis that they place on health concerns in making food choices.

Key words: education, food choices, Tasmania