Making It Easier to Eat Healthily: Consumer Perceptions of Interventions to Make Healthier Food Choices in Wales

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Introduction

Healthy diet is of international concern. In Wales, consumption data indicate consumer reliance on convenience foods, under consumption of fruit and vegetables (which includes intake of fat, salt and sugar) exceeding dietary recommendations and consumption of high fat, salt and sugar food and drink products (HFSSFPs).

Consequently, in Wales 50% adults and 25% of children are overweight. Food-related ill health, particularly among children is reportedly greater in Wales than the rest of the UK. The cost of food-related ill-health has a significant impact on the National Health Service in Wales (Evans et al., 2015).

Such data indicate the critical importance of one of the seven goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015: A healthier Wales. The aim is for a society in which well-being is maximised and in which choices that benefit future health are understood.

Although vast research has been conducted on nutritional interventions internationally, however there is a lack of data specific to consumers in Wales. This report offers an identification of potential initiatives to inform and enable Welsh consumers to make nutritionally-beneficial choices to improve food-related health outcomes.

Methods

As part of a large Welsh Government funded research project (1), an in-depth questionnaire report, international nutritional interventions and governmental policy informed the development of a questionnaire.

The questionnaire explored consumer perceptions of interventions including reformulation of food products, taxation of products, nutritional education, regulation of marketing, access to healthier food and provision of information.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Cardiff School of Health Science Ethics Committee.

The online questionnaire was completed by consumers living in Wales making healthy food choices.

Results and discussion

Reformulation of products:

The ZERO2FIVE° Food Industry Centre Research Group wish to report their findings of the perceived impact of reformulation of food products. This is a complex issue as there are a variety of approaches to product reformulation.

Voluntary reformulation in the UK has reduced levels of target nutrients, particularly salt, however research suggests the need for mandatory reformulation.

Many expressed positive attitudes towards reformulation, with up to a third indicated a willingness to pay for reformulated food products, some expressed concerns regarding the potential health implications of alternatives utilised for reformulation (Figure 1).

Claims for reduced fat, salt and sugar content need to be clearly indicated in labelling (Figure 2).

Taxation of products:

The UK Government childhood obesity plan, will introduce a levy on producers and importers to promote sugar reduction in products, with consumers aiming to be informed (Evans et al., 2015).

Data suggest ‘sugar tax’ can influence consumer purchase of sugar-sweetened drinks (2). Although some believed there a need to tax manufacturers, others believed a tax on consumers would be beneficial (Figure 3). It was perceived that taxation would have more impact on the ‘general public (67%) than on self’ (33%).

The impact of a pre-waterfall ban was perceived to be more beneficial to the general population than for self (Figure 5).

64% believed a pre-waterfall ban would aid the ‘general population’ to eat healthily.

Access to healthier food:

People in deprived areas of Wales reportedly consume an unbalanced diet. (3). Easier access (with regards to location and finances) to healthier food products, linked to the availability of ‘unhealthy’ foods was discussed by many along with fruit and vegetables (Figure 6).

Provision of information:

The majority (75%) reported they notice front-of-pack ‘traffic light’ nutritional information. Legislative bills in California(4) and New York State(5) require health warning labels on sugar-sweetened drinks, such labels may improve awareness and reduce consumption.

Although 52% believed a ‘health warning label’ (Figure 8C), as utilised on tobacco products to illicit fear would have impact, whereas 77% believed an informative label illustrating sugar content and better alternatives (Figure 8B) would impact upon purchase behaviour.

References


Acknowledgements

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Conclusion

Although positive attitudes were expressed towards interventions, consumers in Wales believed interventions would be more beneficial to ‘the general public’ than themselves, indicating interventions may be overlooked, suggesting a barrier for health promotion attempts.

Future interventions need to address personal perceptions of risk, control and responsibility for nutrition and understand factors that influence behaviour. Findings confirm the complexity of efforts to improve health-related behaviours.

It must also be considered that as the majority of food consumed in Wales is not produced in Wales, future policies directed at Welsh manufactured products will be ineffective. Overall, interventions that encourage or subsidise the purchase of healthier foods will have limited impact. Interventions that influence Welsh consumer’s point-of-purchase/consumption decisions will have greatest impact.