

Half of Britain fed up with healthy eating do-gooders!

Contributed by MINTEL
Sunday, 24 April 2005

A major new report from MINTEL, looking at the nation's attitudes towards food, shows that half (48%) of all British adults are 'fed up with being told what to eat by "do-gooders" on healthy eating campaigns'. It would seem that a very sizeable portion of the British public is showing signs of health education "overload", however well-intentioned the initiatives are.

What is more, MINTEL's exclusive consumer research reveals that many adults express an element of confusion over what actually constitutes healthy food. Around seven in 10 (69%) adults say 'it is hard to know which foods are healthy as advice from experts keeps changing', while almost three in five (58%) say that 'it is difficult to work out if foods are healthy from the labels or information on the pack'.

"There is clearly a large number of adults who are suffering from chronic information overload when it comes to healthy eating issues. Today, there is a wealth of information, which bombards the public in matters of health and diet and given the complexity of many of these issues, it is hardly surprising that so many consumers feel confused. It seems they may now be in "switch off mode" when it comes to this advice, which has been named by MINTEL as 'do-gooder fatigue'. Clearly, health education campaigners need to find new ways to encourage change for the better in diet among this section of the population," explains James McCoy, Senior Market Analyst at MINTEL.

"That said, British eating habits remain sharply polarised, and at the other end of the spectrum MINTEL anticipates the emergence of a so-called "Super Consumer". These forward thinking Britons will take everything on board in terms of diet and health issues and will be more discerning about the food they put on their plate, be it for themselves, their partners or their family as a whole," adds James McCoy.

Fat Nation

Despite widespread irritation with healthy eating campaigns, the research also shows that around half of adults consider themselves to be overweight to some degree. In fact, some one in five (22%) feel that they are 'quite a bit overweight', with women (25%) more likely than men (18%) to feel this way.

"It is interesting to speculate whether there is any correlation between a relatively buoyant mood in the economy and spiralling levels of overweight and obese adults in Britain. It should be borne in mind however, that eating habits tend to evolve over time, and that economic prosperity is likely to be only one aspect of a more complex set of factors behind the current so-called obesity epidemic," adds James McCoy.

Those aged 55-64 years old are the most likely to see themselves as being "slightly overweight", which is consistent with more sedentary lifestyles and a tendency to be fighting the classic middle age spread. Interestingly, the 15-24 year olds are the most likely to feel that they are 'about the right weight'.

What is naughty but nice when it comes to food

Mintel's research shows that chocolate confectionery (31%) and crisps/bagged snacks (30%), both of which are heavily advertised, are the "usual suspects" in terms of people's food weaknesses when it comes to weight. But Britain is clearly a nation of 'sweet teeth'. Indeed, some three out of the top four products people see as their weaknesses are sweet - chocolate bars, cakes and biscuits.

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, is that wine (20%) is more likely to be seen as a weight weakness than beer (16%). These findings show just how popular wine has become in Britain over the last two decades, although more people still drink beer and lager than wine.

It would seem that Atkins may also have had an effect on what people see as their food weaknesses. Some one in six (16%) adults see bread as their weakness, despite the Balance of Good Health model actually advocating eating more carbohydrates. This suggests that there is likely to be an 'Atkins effect', where carbohydrates are somewhat frowned upon as 'bad' foods, even if this is at odds with official health information advice.

Saturated with fat

Overall in 2004, some 44% of women claimed to be trying to slim, compared to just 25% of men. When it comes to cutting down on unhealthy food, the top three relate to cutting down the consumption of fat. Some two in five (39%) are at present or have in the past cut back on the amount of saturated fat they eat, making this the most popular change in eating habits. This is closely followed by switching to lower fat alternatives such as skimmed milk (34%), and eating fewer cooked breakfasts or grilling instead of frying (33%), both of which may simply be seen as fairly achievable healthy changes to make.

But it would seem that the British public are less stringent in efforts to curb their sweet tooth, as only a third (32%) of adults are cutting down on sugar and chocolate at present, or have done so in the past.

"This is a fairly modest response when considering the number of people who see sweet products as their weakness. This suggests that Britain is a nation of 'sweet teeth', with many seeing a cut back on sweet treats such as chocolate bars as too much of a sacrifice. The fact is that foods such as chocolate are also important 'mood foods', which for many satisfy an 'emotional' need when bored or fed up. Indeed, some one in five (21%) adults snack because they are bored and a further one in ten

(8%) snack when they are depressed," explains James McCoy.

What is more, just one in five (21%) adults mention cutting down on crisps/nuts/snacks, once again falling short of the proportion who consider these products as the bane of their weight (30%). Findings again show the very 'moreishness' of bagged snacks and crisps in general.

Many adults are also not biting the bullet on their alcohol consumption. In fact, fewer than one in five (17%) adults either have or are currently cutting down the amount of alcohol they drink. Clearly drinking alcoholic beverages has become embedded in British cultural and recreational life.

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