

Fruit & Veg – A New Route To Happiness?

Contributed by Euromonitor International
Wednesday, 31 October 2012

A recent study suggests that a high intake of fresh produce is not only conducive to physical health, but also contributes considerably to mental and emotional well being, regardless of other socioeconomic factors.

This is a potentially very exciting discovery in many aspects. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption could help reduce public health expenditure, give the industry an opportunity to educate consumers at the same time as establishing a new marketing platform for fresh produce, and provide further impetus for public health bodies to revise their recommendations for fresh fruit and vegetable intake upwards.

Depression weighs heavily on public health budgets

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies depression as the leading cause of disability worldwide, with an estimated 350 million sufferers. Each year, around 7% of the global population suffer from major depressive illness, and 25% are affected by a milder form, including anxiety, a debilitating state of mind which can prevent individuals from carrying out simple day-to-day tasks.

According to the WHO, mental health disorders, the bulk of which are accounted for by depression, claim 26% of the overall disease burden in the EU. In some countries, like Denmark and the Netherlands, up to half of long-term sick leave and disability payments are spent on mental health issues, with depression making up the overwhelming majority of cases. Almost 10% of the EU adult population is taking anti-depressant medication.

Furthermore, the WHO points out that mental and physical health are not separate entities – depressive illness can cause heart disease and may even be a factor in the aetiology of cancer.

Fruit and veg feature in happiness equation

Despite a plethora of research backing up the correlation between high intakes of fresh fruits and vegetables and physical health, the connection between diet and mental health remains rather poorly explored.

A recent paper, however, entitled ‘*Is Psychological Well-being Linked to the Consumption of Fruit and Vegetables?*’, due for publication in the journal ‘*Social Indicators Research*’, set about investigating this link and has come to some surprising conclusions.

The researchers, drawn from several institutions, including Dartmouth College (USA) and Warwick Medical School in the UK, analysed three sets of data from around 80,000 individuals, collected from across the UK (England, Scotland and Wales).

The study found a strong positive correlation between high fruit and vegetable consumption and mental well being, with well being peaking at around seven portions per day.

The researchers felt confident enough about their findings to judge them robust in the face of a large number of demographic, social and economic variables. However, they did concede that their findings are merely suggestive of a causal relationship, and that more investigative effort is needed to validate their conclusions.

Nutrition impacts the brain

Mental health and well being is certainly no less desirable than physical wellness. As anyone who has ever suffered a bout of deep depression can attest, an attack of the blues can paralyse one’s life to an even greater extent than many physical ailments.

‘Natural’ approaches to combating depression are highly sought after. Compared to dealing with physical maladies, people who are struggling with mental health issues remain highly reluctant to seek out professional help, eg from a doctor, psychotherapist or counsellor. And often, they are even more resistant when it comes to taking medication to help them regain the biochemical equilibrium in their brain chemistry.

It is well accepted in professional circles that mental health problems, including depression, are not down to personal inadequacy, but can be caused by (often temporary) imbalances in brain chemistry. Given that the food we eat provides all the raw materials for the body’s biochemical and metabolic processes, it should come as no surprise that brain functions are also strongly influenced by nutritional factors. Â

A new positioning platform and future basis for policy revision

Unfortunately, the general public is still largely unaware that a link exists between nutritional intake and mental health. Creating an awareness of this connection, and informing consumers that increasing fruit and vegetable intake can help to

keep depression at bay is well worth exploring as a future marketing platform for fresh produce.

As pointed out by the researchers who conducted the aforementioned study, a lot of work remains to be done to elucidate the link between fresh produce consumption and mental and emotional wellbeing. Besides the obvious fact that a handful of studies are simply not enough to prove a causal relationship and nor do they even begin to ascertain the mechanisms, it would be of interest, perhaps further down the line, to establish whether specific kinds of fresh produce have a greater effect on personal happiness than others. This research is still in its infancy, and would benefit greatly from more investment, including from industry stakeholders.

The study also suggested that seven daily portions appeared to correlate with optimum life satisfaction, rather than the five portions commonly recommended by official public health bodies in most countries around the world, including the UK, Germany and the US.

Granted, the five portions doctrine was never based on the quantities required for optimum physical or mental health, but had more to do with setting achievable goals for populations whose average daily intakes were routinely languishing below three portions. Buoyed by public health promotions, coupled with industry effort, consumption levels are slowly starting to rise. Our data show that on a global level, per capita fresh fruit and vegetable consumption increased by 8% over the 2006-2011 period. Studies such as these will eventually provide further impetus for an upward revision of recommendations, ideally to seven or even eight portions – a more than welcome step for the health of consumers and that of the fresh produce industry alike.

By Simone Baroke, Contributing Analyst at Euromonitor International

Republished with permission from Euromonitor Market Research Blog, originally posted on 30 October 2012