

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 25th September 2020

Corona lockdown: a time to cook!

Food consumption patterns have also changed during the lockdown period, with many consumers reporting that they consume certain foods with increased frequency, most notably alcohol and sugar-sweetened beverages followed by white bread/pasta, milk and dairy products.

A recent survey of adults in Ireland conducted by Teagasc, University College Cork and the University of Antwerp, examining shopping and cooking behaviours before and during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, has shown that most people had more time available for activities during lockdown, compared to life before. So has this impacted on their food-related behaviour? Some answers are provided below based on approximately 400 consumers who responded to an online survey during April 2020, when full lockdown restrictions were in place. Most of the respondents (two-thirds) shop for themselves, with one-quarter having shopping done by a partner. Most indicated that they had been working before and during lockdown, with most working from home during the lockdown.

Getting food to the table

Positive food-related behaviours can be seen during lockdown, with significant increases in meal planning, use of shopping lists, using up leftovers and trying to make healthier choices. Food label and nutritional information usage, however, did not change during lockdown. While physically going to the shop has been commonplace before and during lockdown, there has been a small increase in online shopping practices since lockdown. There was also some evidence of stockpiling: the top five foods consumers indicated that they stockpiled when shopping were pasta/rice, followed by eggs, flour, vegetables (fresh and frozen) and milk. In general, consumers increased purchasing of all foods to some degree relative to their purchasing behaviours prior to lockdown. Cooking and shopping experiences are outlined in **Figure 1** and it is noteworthy that shopping has become increasingly stressful, frustrating and time consuming, as well as less enjoyable than previously.

Despite limited access to certain ingredients during lockdown, consumers have reported an improvement in their cooking skills, which was reflected in a significant increase in baking bread, pies and main meals from scratch, as a direct result of more time availability to engage in these behaviours. Consequently, people have experienced increased levels of satisfaction and enjoyment when preparing and cooking foods during lockdown.

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What gets to the table?

Food consumption patterns have also changed during the lockdown period, with many consumers reporting that they consume certain foods with increased frequency, most notably alcohol and sugarsweetened beverages followed by white bread/pasta, milk and dairy products. Increased frequency of consumption was also reported for sugary and savoury snacks. These are also the foods that were more likely to be stockpiled. Foods such as legumes/pulses, nuts, processed meats and fish were reported to be consumed less frequently during lockdown compared to before lockdown.

Living well in lockdown

Food-related behaviours from planning to shopping, preparation and subsequent consumption have changed in Ireland as a result of the lockdown. While some of the behaviours have a positive impact in terms of more cooking of meals from scratch and increased enjoyment in preparing foods, other behaviours have been less health oriented. Sustained higher frequencies of consumption of products such as alcohol, sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks could give rise to concern if the restrictions are to be in place for a longer time period. As most countries, including Ireland, start to ease restrictions, it would be useful to encourage consumers to maintain the healthy food and lifestyle habits developed during lockdown and to tackle the less healthy ones. Given the forecasts and the fears associated with future waves of the virus in the absence of a vaccine, the potential for future lockdowns remains high. Hence we need to continue to promote the healthy choice, ensuring that it is available, and encourage healthy lockdown behaviours, in the absence of time barriers. The improvement in cooking and baking skills provides a foundation upon which to build initiatives for healthy eating behaviours.

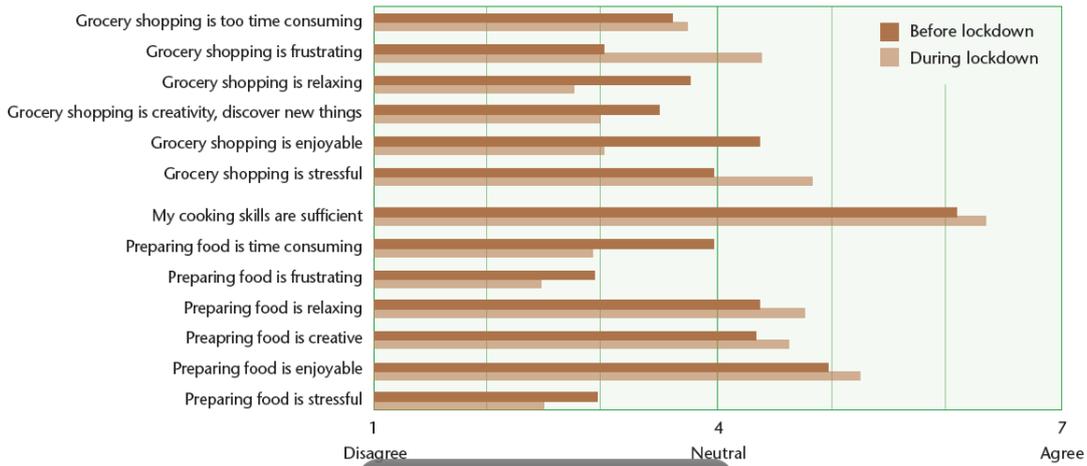


FIGURE 1: Adults' cooking and shopping experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown in Ireland