

With cheese please

TEAGASC research into patterns of cheese consumption can help to dispel myths about the role of cheese in a healthy diet.



Cheese is an ancient food with archaeological evidence of its production dating back to 7,000 BC. More than nine millennia later, there are more than one thousand varieties of cheese available to choose from. Cheese is an excellent source of many essential nutrients such as calcium, phosphorous and protein, and can make a meaningful contribution to a healthy and balanced diet. However, in recent years cheese has received criticism primarily due to its salt and fat content.

A detailed analysis of cheese consumption and factors influencing its consumption in Irish adults was undertaken as part of the Food Institutional Research Measure (FIRM)-funded CheeseBoard research programme. The aim of this research was to examine cheese consumption in Irish adults and to determine its association with healthy eating, consumption of other foods and food choice attitudes. Analysis of food choice attitudes, sociodemographic information and consumption patterns was completed using the data from the National Adult Nutrition Survey (NANS – www.iuna.net).

Those consuming the recommended intake of 25g per day still remain within the dietary guidelines for fat intake in their overall diet.

Findings

The findings illustrate varying cheese consumption patterns within the Irish population and outline what motivates Irish consumers to eat cheese. Approximately two-thirds of the population are

consuming cheese, with an average daily intake of 21g. In terms of overall fat intake, those who are consuming the recommended intake of 25g per day still remain within the dietary guidelines for fat intake from their overall diet.

Moreover, their fat intakes are the same as those who consume very little or no cheese at all. No association was found between cheese intake and body mass index (BMI). Indeed, there was no difference in BMI between those with the highest intake of cheese (40g/day) and those who did not consume cheese. Generally, non-consumers were slightly older.

This may reflect older adults' decisions to avoid foods associated with cholesterol and blood pressure, but it may also reflect the fact that younger people snack more, and frequently use cheese in these snacks.

Cheese consumers were also more likely to be consumers of bread, butter/spreads, soups, rice and pasta. This reflects more traditional use for cheese in lunches as a sandwich filling or served as an ingredient in the main meal of the day.

Food choice attitudes also varied, with different levels of cheese consumed across the population. Cheese consumption was low in consumers for whom food played an important role in the diet to de-stress or to feel good. Furthermore, lower cheese consumption was observed in those who self-reported good cooking skills, and had high portion size awareness and healthy eating intentions. In addition, consumers who assigned high levels of importance to sensory attributes such as taste and the appearance of food had lower cheese intakes. This indicates that cheese is not always the obvious choice for consumers in general who seek mood-enhancing, healthy or tasty foods. However, certain subgroups such as the cheese connoisseurs, who will actively seek out cheese as an indulgent and tasty product, are not accounted for in these analyses.

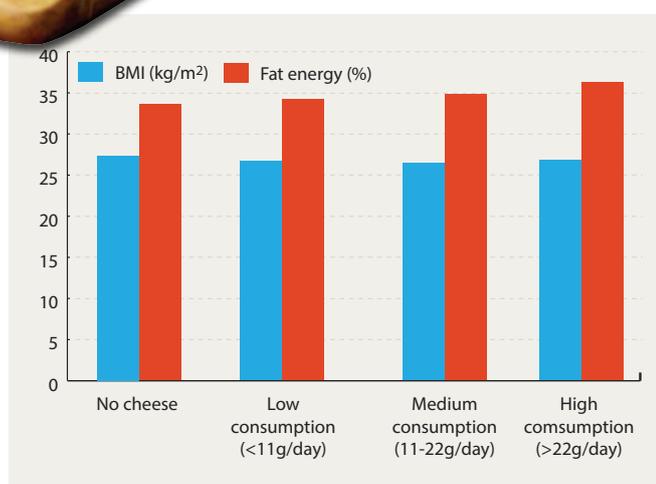


FIGURE 1: No association was found between cheese intake and BMI.

Cheese – a healthy choice

These findings support the opportunity to clarify the role of cheese as part of a healthy diet, with clear and effective communication of the benefits of consuming the recommended portion of cheese and to dispel many health myths associated with its consumption. Cheese is frequently displaced from the diet in favour of other foods during weight loss or healthy eating regimes. Yet our evidence clearly shows that regular cheese consumers can remain within healthy eating guidelines for fat.

Furthermore, to remove it totally from the diet is to remove a valuable source of protein and many other essential nutrients, as well as the health-promoting bioactive compounds inherent in cheese. This can present a particular problem if these essential nutrients are not sufficiently delivered by the other foods in the

person's diet. Opportunities exist to communicate the role of cheese in a healthy diet where benefits are experienced without compromising on health.

Taste should not be overlooked as the most important food choice motive for most consumers and additional opportunities exist to promote the potential of cheese to offer a range of benefits that incorporates attributes such as taste, mood and health.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the FIRM programme.

Authors

Sinéad McCarthy

Research Officer, Department of Agrifood Business and Spatial Analysis, Rural Economy and Development Programme, Teagasc Food Research Centre, Ashtown, Dublin 15
Correspondence: sinead.mccarthy@teagasc.ie

Mary McCarthy

Professor of Marketing, Cork University Business School, University College Cork

