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THE HEALTHINESS OF PACKAGED FOODS: PERCEPTIONS OF APDS

RACHAEL THURECHT, FIONA PELLY, SHERI COOPER

University of the Sunshine Coast, QLD, Australia

There is evidence that there is variation in the way dietitians perceive the healthiness of food, however little is known about what informs individual opinion. The aim of this study was to examine Accredited Practising Dietitians' (APDs) perceptions of the healthiness of a sample of packaged foods, and determine the influences on their ratings. A total of 120 APDs rated the healthiness (1–10, less to more healthy) of seven packaged foods (bread, confectionary, breakfast cereal, yoghurt, curry, spread and crumble) via an online survey using Likert-scale and open-response questions. Participants were provided with a generic name, ingredient list and nutrient information panel (NIP). All foods varied in the range of healthiness ratings, however this was less for confectionary and crumble. Crumble was rated significantly ($P = 0.03$) healthier by more experienced APDs (≥ 6 vs ≤ 5 years). Bread ($\bar{x} = 7.39 \pm 1.44$) and confectionary ($\bar{x} = 1.33 \pm 0.69$) were rated the most and least healthy foods respectively. No other differences based on experience or employment were detected. Content analysis revealed that the NIP, the type, order and number of ingredients, as well the presence of specific ingredients (e.g. fruit/vegetables or additives) were considered in the rating. In addition, the name of the food, professional judgement (fit within a meal or whole diet), personal food preferences and relevance to the Australian Dietary Guidelines were reported. The large variation in responses may have implications for research or policy development where expert opinion of the healthiness of food is considered a gold standard measure.

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Contact author: Fiona Pelly – fpelly@usc.edu.au