



Consumer knowledge about fats

As a company in the food industry or as a product developer working in it you want to develop healthy products, but also need to react to the attitude of the consumer with regard to fats. The following questions are important in order to arrive at a good range of products:

- *what is the general trend?*
- *what does the consumer worry about where health is concerned?*
- *what does the consumer know about fats and where are the gaps in his knowledge?*
- *what fat or product is preferred and why?*
- *what products can be healthier?*

THE FOLLOWING HAVE ALSO BEEN PUBLISHED IN THIS SERIES:

- What is fat?
- Functions of fats in food
- Claims about fats
- The role of fats in the composition of taste

This fact sheet gives you answers to these questions on the basis of existing consumer research. The data quoted here is largely taken from a report from the Netherlands Nutrition Centre prepared in 2007. The Netherlands Nutrition Centre in collaboration with the Netherlands Heart Foundation instructed the research office Motivaction to research the knowledge, attitude and need for information of consumers with reference to fats, particularly saturated fat.

General health trend

The general trend is that of growing health consciousness and with this also increasing knowledge about health on the part of the consumer. In 2005/2006 about 65% of consumers wanted to eat more healthily. The increased focus on health is not, however, always reflected in healthy behaviour, it appears to be difficult to break ingrained habits. This is shown among other things by the increased numbers of people with obesity in recent years.

The intake of fat has decreased in the same period. Fat is often seen as fattening and as a cause of obesity, but overweight is not just caused by fats in the diet, and not even just by the diet. Just as important is the amount of exercise taken, it is a question of balance. Fats are an essential part of a healthy diet. Between twenty and forty percent of the calories in a healthy diet are obtained from fat.

Consumers are becoming increasingly health conscious, but do not always act accordingly.

What does the consumer worry about where health is concerned?

More than half of the population finds it important to watch the amount of fat in food. In fact, where healthy eating is concerned, eating less fat is the first thing that comes to mind.

The most commonly named reasons for watching the amount of fat are a healthy diet, reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases and maintaining the correct weight. In order to achieve this latter objective the consumer chooses most often to eat less between meals (56%) or for products with less fat (50%). But eating products with more fibre (42%) or with less sugar (36%) are also often mentioned, just as are taking more exercise (38%) or eating smaller portions (25%). Older persons (55-65 years) take eating less fat into account because of a special diet when choosing their food, and the slightly younger age group (45-54 years) also pays more than average attention to the amount of fat in food in order to prevent contracting such ailments as a high cholesterol level or cardiovascular diseases.

Reasons for worrying about the amount of fat in food are in particular a healthy diet, weight and the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

What do people know about fats?

The Motivaction research showed that knowledge about fat is good and this knowledge has increased compared with a few years ago. Nine out of ten people in the Netherlands know that there are different sorts of fat. More than half named saturated and unsaturated fat spontaneously and when helped almost everybody knew the difference. Almost 70% knew that unsaturated fat is the healthiest. This was about 60% in 2004.

Another piece of consumer research, though, the Becel Heart monitor, shows a less favourable picture. From this it appeared that only half of the people were aware of the fact that some fats are good and some bad for the heart and the blood vessels, and one in five did not know what cholesterol is. People are very concerned about the health of their heart, but a large proportion (80%) is not aware that adopting a healthy diet and way of life can do a great deal to improve the health of the heart.

The objective of the Product Board for Margarine, Fats and Oils (MVO) as knowledge centre is to disseminate reliable and balanced information about the role of fats in a healthy diet. This information complies with the policy of the Dutch government and the Dietary Guidelines (in Dutch: Richtlijnen Goede Voeding) from the Netherlands Health Council. It is also the objective of the Product Board to stimulate an improvement in the fatty acid composition of food.

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The research carried out by Motivaction showed that omega-3 fatty acids are even less known, only 3% named this type of fat spontaneously, but when helped the awareness was high, almost 80%. However, 65 % eat less fish (contains omega-3 fatty acids) than is recommended (Becel Heart monitor). Further, the awareness, when helped, of trans fatty acids has increased: 19% had heard of them and three-quarters of these knew that they were unhealthy. In 2004, only 7% recognized this type of fat.

People in the higher social classes know more about fat than those in the lower classes. They are more aware of the existence of healthy and less healthy fats and find it important to be careful about these.

Everybody should really know the difference between the different types of fats. The provision of information is thus an important point for attention. Manufacturers can react to this by providing clear information on the label, making nutritional value declarations, using logos and providing websites with information and recipes.

Almost nine out of ten consumers know where they can find information about fat, but still more than half would like more information about fats in the future. There is in particular a need for a list of products containing healthy and unhealthy fats, recipes for tasty and healthy food or logos to help consumers to stimulate healthy choices such as 'My Choice' or the 'Healthy choice clover'. Young people (18-24 years) value these logos more than people in other age groups. Older people (55-65 years) want clear information on the label more than anything else.

Preference for fats for preparing food

When using the visible fats, those used in the preparation of food, the choice between the healthier liquid variants with a large proportion of unsaturated fatty acids and the solid variants also has to be made. The Motivaction research also asked what sort of fat was used for cooking meat. This showed that most people cook or fry meat in oil (43%) or liquid margarine (41%), only one in five people in the Netherlands still uses wrapped (solid) margarine and only two percent uses butter. Reasons for users of hard margarine or butter not to change to liquid margarine are the higher price, habit or because they did not know that it was healthier. Oil is not used out of habit, or because they found solid margarine or because it made a brown gravy.

In contrast to cooking fats, by far the majority of consumers already use liquid deep-frying fat at home.

The range on offer, the price, taste and knowledge are important in getting more people to use the healthier liquid fats.



Behaviour in relation to what is on offer

The fact that it appears difficult to get consumers to change their behaviour can in some cases be ascribed to the fact that there is a lack of a healthy range on offer. Research carried out by research office Datamonitor showed that 20% of the European and American consumers would like to eat and snack healthily. The share of new, healthy snacks, however, is less than the demand and at present is only about 3% per year.

There is a market for healthy, tasty in-between meals products

Healthy products for in-between meals also have too little attractive power according to consumers. The taste is not exciting enough and they give less satisfaction than the normal snacks.

Fat is at the front of the mind of the consumer

Summarising, it can be stated that fat is an important issue for the Dutch consumer. It is important for the industry to react to the needs of the health conscious consumer.

Products with less fat, particularly less saturated fat, meet the need of the consumer to eat tastily and healthily.