

Why do we opt for the light version?

03 May 2013

Researchers from the National Consumer Research Centre and the University of Helsinki published a recent study as part of a Finnish research project on weight management (KULUMA, 2009-2011). They analysed attitudes of middle-aged and elderly Finns towards products designed for weight management and found that consumers can have less favourable views towards 'light' products in general but still opt for them when being on a diet to lose weight.

Sixty-eight participants (47 women and 21 men) aged between 38 and 77 years took part in the qualitative study. Discussions in eight focus groups as well as written product evaluations were used to research attitudes towards different food products for weight management and the link to participants' perceptions of healthy eating. Respondents were asked to classify 20 different products as suitable or unsuitable for weight management. Previous research has shown that consumers perceive healthfulness of foods and their ability to help weight change as closely linked. Still unexplored are the underlying reasons and the link between weight management and healthy eating. The study at hand focussed on the research question why people may criticise foods produced for weight management but nonetheless consume it when being on a diet to lose weight.

When participants evaluated the different products, a general pattern could be observed. Basic and unprocessed foods had a more positive image and were perceived as suitable for weight management. Processed foods, in contrast, were perceived less favourably. Most foods specifically designed for weight management were rated unsuitable, e.g. a soft drink for weight management, a light muesli bar or a light beer. According to the researchers, conflicting views and ideals of healthy eating can help explain this. While the respondents said that weight management and healthy eating go hand in hand, study results show that this was not necessarily put into practice. Participants stated that one could gain weight by eating healthily while weight could also be lost by eating unhealthily.

Participants showed interest in energy content, the quality and quantity of fat, proteins, and carbohydrates with a special focus on sugar. This interest, however, could not fully explain the weight management behaviour and food choice observed in this study. Additional factors became apparent when focussing the discussions on general healthy eating, rather than weight management only. The main aspects discussed were the naturalness of foods and the general ideal of a moderate consumption to manage weight. In terms of the respondents' eating morality, the actual necessity for specific foods for weight management was doubted. A recurrent statement was that "if one eats in moderation, foods designed for weight management become unnecessary". However, the researchers found that situational replacement can take place, i.e. 'normal' foods are exchanged for the 'light' version if seen as beneficial for a certain situation, e.g. during a diet to lose weight.

Results of the qualitative study show that moderate consumption is seen as key to body weight management. Products for weight management can be evaluated by consumers as unnecessary and the consumption of basic and unprocessed foods is seen as the right way for a healthy diet. However, 'normal'



products are replaced by the 'light' version under certain conditions to facilitate weight loss or to maintain current weight. The perception of foods designed for weight management is highly influenced by different ideals that consumers hold of a healthy diet and the situational context of each consumer.

For further information:

[Niva, M., Jauho, M., Mäkelä J. \(2013\) "If I drink it anyway, then I rather take the light one". Appropriation of foods and drinks designed for weight management among middle-aged and elderly Finns, *Appetite* 64 \(May\), pp. 12-19.](#)