

## **The consumer and a healthy diet - a UK consumer organisation perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The impact that poor diets have on health in the UK is clear. Around 21 per cent of men and 23.5 per cent of women in England are now obese. A similar trend can be seen across the UK. One in every three people will develop cancer in their life and a third of all cancers are believed to be diet-related. One in every four men and one in every six women die from coronary heart disease and it is estimated that up to thirty per cent of these deaths are due to unhealthy diets.

Perhaps most concerning is the increasing incidence of obesity among children - 8.5 per cent of six year olds and 15 per cent of 15 year olds are obese - and associated identification of type 2 diabetes in British adolescents. A recent report on School Dinners in Which? magazine highlighted the poor quality of many children's diets with hardly any fruit and vegetables, cheap meat products and a regular diet of crisps and chocolate. The school meals were repetitive and read like a fast food menu.

Part of the problem has been government failure to tackle poor nutrition. It has all too often been seen as a matter of consumer choice and government has been reluctant to intervene. But with the hectic lifestyles we lead and our changing relationship with food - eating out more, more ready-prepared meals, our desire for easy to find healthy options for example - we've become far more reliant on the food industry and more in need of protection.

Consumers' Association has highlighted the many examples of dishonest labelling and misleading marketing of food products, including the increasing number of nutrition and health claims, such as '% fat free' and 'light' claims. Now that consumers are starting to appreciate the importance of eating more fruit and vegetables, more products are being marketed on this basis, even though some are high in sugar and salt for example. Added to this there are an increasing number of products making health claims and fortified foods on sale - although it is unclear which claims can be substantiated and many of these so-called 'healthy' products are also high in fat, sugar and salt.

The evidence for the links between diet and health can no longer be disputed. The government has committed itself to produce a 'food and health strategy' for England. Similar initiatives are in place or under way in the rest of the UK. They must rise to this challenge: a more co-ordinated and pro-active approach is needed that tackles the root causes of why so many people have poor quality diets and provide the means to access a healthy diet. While the food industry also needs to accept its responsibility and take a much more responsible approach to the way that it markets foods, legislation needs to be tightened in order to prevent consumers from being exploited.