



Nutrition Society Congress 2024, 2–5 July 2024

Revisiting attitudes and awareness around sustainable diets after 10 years

E. Cleland¹, D. McBey¹, V. Darlene¹, B.J.J. McCormick¹ and J.I. Macdiarmid¹
¹The Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

While the impact of high meat consumption on the environment⁽¹⁾ and health⁽²⁾ have been studied for decades, public knowledge of these issues is less well understood. The aim of this study was to assess the awareness and knowledge of the environmental impact of food choices among the public, as well as people's willingness to reduce their consumption of meat. We sought to repeat the study conducted by Macdiarmid *et al.*⁽³⁾, which found limited knowledge of the link between meat and the environment, and a general unwillingness to change, to understand if public knowledge of and perceptions around sustainable diets have changed in the decade since the original study was conducted.

Nine in-person focus groups were conducted between March and August 2023. Adult participants (≥18 years old) were recruited in Scotland from populations matching the original study⁽³⁾ based on a balanced urban vs rural, locations and high vs low socio-economic status (SES) areas. Data was coded and analysed using a thematic approach.

Most participants (n = 60, ranging from 5–11 participants per group) believed that food choice impacts the environment and human health. Views diverged between the sociodemographic groups with urban/higher SES groups generally more knowledgeable of the impact of meat on the environment and rural/lower SES participants typically less aware. Willingness to reduce meat consumption was also split by SES and motivations were different. Higher SES groups were more willing to reduce meat consumption, and in some cases reported having already started to do so, than lower SES groups. The former groups discussed ethical, health and environmental reasons whereas the latter groups were more sensitive to the price of alternatives. Meat, variously defined, but generally ruminant meat, was considered an important part of a 'balanced' diet and most participants were reluctant to remove it entirely.

Although the language of dietary sustainability was not uniformly recognised or understood, there was greater understanding of the underlying concepts in 2023 compared to 2013. The environmental impacts of food choices were more often couched in terms of the physical environment (e.g., packaging) than climatic impacts (i.e., greenhouse gas emissions). There was a strong sense that local (i.e., Scottish) production was more 'sustainable' than imported food and there was broad willingness to reduce, but not remove, meat consumption in principle.

Acknowledgments

Funding Support: Scottish Government's Rural and Environment Science Analytical Services Strategic Research Programme

References

1. Steinfeld H, Gerber P, Wassenaar T *et al.* (2006) *Livestock's long shadow: environmental issues and options*. Rome: Food & Agriculture Organization.
2. Sinha R, Cross AJ, Graubard BI *et al.* (2009) *Arch Intern Med* **169**, 562–571.
3. Macdiarmid JI, Douglas F & Campbell J (2016) *Appetite* **96**, 487–493.