

# Foods that Harm? Foods that Heal?

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As chairperson of Freelance Dietitians, just completing my tenure, I felt I was going out on a high as over 80 dietitians assembled on 14th March 2012 for our annual study day.

That attendance made it by far the group's best attended event ever. What had appealed to so many? Possibly the subject. Every day sees new stories in consumer and scientific media about the effects of food on health. Dietitians not up to speed with it can be caught out by clients who are.

Perhaps it was the top speakers: all high-profile specialists giving up-to-date evidence on how diet and certain foods impact on cancer, the cardiovascular system, gastro-intestinal health, food-intolerance and allergy, weight, cognition and hydration. The day included an update and workshop on the Nutrition and Health Claims Regulations, in particular article 12c, which outlaws any health claim which includes a recommendation by a named health professional – particularly troublesome for freelance dietitians who have been in effect silenced in the popular media.

There's no doubt Freelance Dietitians, helped by the British Dietetic Association of which they are a specialist group, had pulled out all the stops when it came to the day's sponsors and exhibitors. Waitrose, Danone, Alpro, Stevia, British Coffee Association and Nutri-facts all contributed, and Waitrose even launched their free-from Love Life range at the event.

## Foods that affect cancer risk

Dr Rachel Thompson, deputy head of science at the World Cancer Research Fund International, said their mission is threefold: to fund research on the relationship of nutrition, activity and weight-management to cancer risk; to interpret the scientific literature; and to educate people to make choices to reduce their risk.

She estimated that, in the UK, 80,000 cancer cases per year could be prevented by people addressing the measures shown in this diagram. For example, for bowel cancer, the modifiable risks for which there is convincing evidence include eating red and processed meats, drinking alcohol, being fat especially abdominally, and being sedentary. Recent research has highlighted the benefit of fibre-containing foods, particularly whole grains.

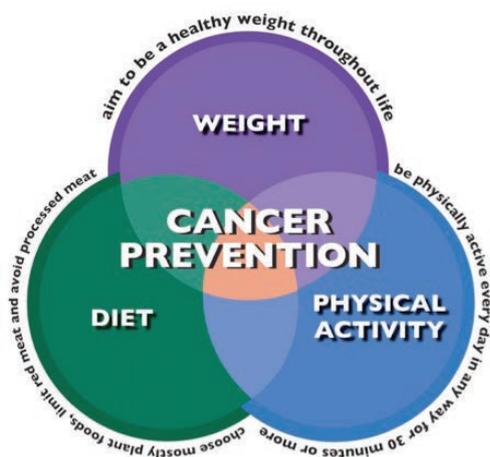


Diagram Courtesy of WCRF UK

## The role of Stevia in tackling obesity

Dr Margaret Ashwell OBE for the Global Stevia Institute, predicted the number of obese adults worldwide is set to rise from 400 million to 700 million in the next three years.

Margaret's advice was to focus efforts on those with central obesity, as measured by waist-to-height ratio. This ratio is a key detector of the risk of obesity to cardiometabolic health for all ages from five years. A low-risk ratio is under 0.5. The risk rises rapidly with a ratio of 0.6 or more.

She went on to illustrate how Stevia, a safe, natural, calorie-free sweetener, can help people to cut out 100kcal a day. This is because it could replace sugar in soft drinks, confectionery, preserves and even savoury snacks: the four categories identified as the UK's main contributors to high-calorie intakes without nutritional benefits.

## Coffee: healthful or harmful?

Dr Sarah Schenker, representing the British Coffee Association, set out the scientific evidence on this controversy, including details of the components of coffee and their effects. She explained how the long-reported harmful effects of coffee – dehydration, insomnia, reduced mineral absorption and inappropriateness for pregnant women and athletes – are either outweighed by healthful effects or ameliorated by moderating and regulating intake and avoiding it with meals and at bedtime.

She highlighted evidence that a regular, life-long consumption of four to five cups of coffee per day may slow physiological, age-related cognitive decline, help prevent Parkinson's disease, and reduce the risk of stroke and diabetes. In sports, coffee has been shown to improve concentration and performance and to aid hydration.

## Diets harmful to heart health

Linda Main of HEART UK, in association with Alpro Soya, expertly covered best dietary practice to prevent coronary heart disease. She delivered the stark reminder that the disease is the main cause of premature death in the UK. Factors affected by diet include dyslipidaemia, high blood pressure, diabetes and insulin-resistance. She stressed the benefit of a reduction in blood-LDL-cholesterol, illustrating that 1mmol/l less for five years resulted in a fifth fewer coronary deaths and vascular events.

Linda presented the Ultimate Cholesterol-Lowering Plan, proven to lower LDL-cholesterol by five to 24 per cent. The plan involves eating a low-saturated fat diet and daily portions of soya protein (15-25g), plant sterols and stanols (1.5-2.4g), soluble fibre (15-20g), and nuts (30g). It has the advantage that these elements are effective singly and combined, so even partial compliance gets results.

### A heart-healthy regime (HEART UK)

Food	Daily Goal
Fruit and vegetables	5 + (include 1 pulse)
Whole grains	3+
Fish and shellfish	2 servings per week
Nuts	30g
Low fat dairy products	2-3 servings
Vegetable (nut and seed) oils	Spreads, dressings, cooking
Food/lifestyle	Daily Goal
Fats, oils or foods made with partially hydrogenated fats	Avoid
Processed meats	Up to 2 servings per week
Sugar sweetened beverages, desserts, confectionery, bakery foods	Modest intake – up to 5 per week
Alcohol	2-3 units for men and 1-2 units women plus alcohol-free days every week
Sedentary Behaviour	Limit sitting, increase activity

## Detrimental foods in irritable bowel syndrome

IBS is one of the most common conditions for which people consult freelance dietitians, so we were keen to hear from Heidi Staudacher, of King's College London, that foods containing certain fermentable carbohydrates can worsen symptoms in many people with IBS. Heidi spelled out the acronym FODMAP (fermentable oligo-, di- and mono-saccharides and polyols) and explained how restricting FODMAPs reduces the symptoms of IBS for a majority of sufferers and is often effective in other functional bowel disorders.

Surveys show that although the low-FODMAP diet poses some difficulties in food-shopping and eating out, 88 per cent of patients find the benefits of the diet outweigh any practical difficulties. These fermentable carbohydrates are present in healthy, every-day foods, including many fruits and vegetables, and added to numerous processed foods, meaning careful label-reading is essential. So restricting them in the diet requires careful management by a dietitian using appropriate written resources.

## What's new in the free-from market?

Moira Howie, nutrition manager of Waitrose, updated us on the dynamic free-from market. Some £57 million was spent on retail free-from foods during the last quarter of 2011, up almost 14 per cent on 2010. Almost all of these were gluten-free and/or dairy-free, and largely bought at major supermarkets. The free-from range includes breakfast cereals, bread, other baked goods, flour-type mixes and snacks. The free-from bakery sector has seen particularly dramatic growth (16% last year), due in part to new introductions and product improvements. Waitrose's new launch includes 40 new products, both sweet and savoury, formulated to taste as good as wheaten foods. Happily, we've seen the last of the white tinned foam that was the only gluten-free bread available to coeliacs. A new trend when cooking for family and friends is to serve gluten-free foods that appeal to everyone.

## Probiotics – from clinical evidence to guidelines

Carrie Ruddock, health affairs manager at Danone, explored the role of probiotics. Evidence presented included work on the benefits of probiotics in preventing and controlling acute and infectious diarrhoea, for example, that resulting from treatment with antibiotics. Carrie highlighted independent guidelines supporting the use of probiotics in these conditions from the World Gastroenterology Organisation.

She went on to present evidence on the benefits of probiotics for IBS and referenced the supporting guidelines from NICE. There is also substantial clinical data suggesting probiotics can boost immunity and help in a wide range of other conditions including allergic asthma and rhinitis, respiratory infections, and other gastrointestinal diseases.

## What can we say about food and health legally?

Alison Nelson, the BDA's food and health policy officer, gave a clear overview of the Nutrition and Health Claims on Foods regulations and other standards for the profession. She explored the practicality of dietitians' communicating the science behind authorised health claims without

recommending products, but warned that so far very few health claims have been authorised, 80 per cent of applications having been rejected.

The workshop raised serious concerns about the constraints imposed by the regulations on dietitians, particularly freelancers, who mostly work in commercial settings. Some were optimistic that acting within their professional code of conduct would protect them from the regulations, whilst others wanted further definition and examples of legitimate communications.

Alison called for examples of potential opportunities and published communications that potentially contravene the regulations, particularly in social marketing media. These will inform the BDA's work with their insurers and with the Department of Health to ensure that the regulations do not prevent dietitians from making and communicating legitimate health claims.

## Summing it up in one

Reflecting on the day, Jill Scott, organiser for Freelance Dietitians, said: *"It's been a marvellous opportunity to hear expert reviews of some key health aspects of food. It puts freelance dietitians in a unique position to influence their clients, both individuals and organisations, armed with the facts."*

### Useful websites on these topics for health professionals:

- British Dietetic Association: [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)
- British Coffee Association: [www.britishcoffeeassociation.org/health](http://www.britishcoffeeassociation.org/health)
- Danone: [www.probioticsinpractice.co.uk](http://www.probioticsinpractice.co.uk)
- WCRF International: [www.dietandcancerreport.org](http://www.dietandcancerreport.org)
- HEART UK: [www.heartuk.org.uk/HealthProfessionals](http://www.heartuk.org.uk/HealthProfessionals)
- Alpro Soya: [www.alprolive.co.uk](http://www.alprolive.co.uk)
- King's College London: [www.kcl.ac.uk/fodmaps](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/fodmaps)
- Stevia Institute: [www.globalsteviaintstitute.com](http://www.globalsteviaintstitute.com)
- Waitrose: [www.waitrose.com/specialdiets](http://www.waitrose.com/specialdiets)
- DSM: [www.nutri-facts.org](http://www.nutri-facts.org)



For further information, or to become a member of Freelance Dietitians, please visit:

[www.freelancedietitians.org](http://www.freelancedietitians.org)