

A new paradox on our plate? Knowing the nutritional content of foods doesn't equate to healthy eating

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A study by Université Laval's Maurice Doyon and French and American researchers shows that U.S. consumers know surprisingly more about the fat content of the foods they buy than their French counterparts.

Paradoxically, the obesity rate is nearly three times higher in the United States (35%) than it is in France (12%). In light of these results, published in a recent edition of the *British Food Journal*, the researchers cast doubt on the notion that providing nutritional information is an effective way to encourage healthy eating habits.

Dr. Doyon of the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences, along with his colleagues Laure Saulais, Bernard Ruffieux (France), and Harry Kaiser (United States) had over 300 French, Quebec, and American consumers answer a questionnaire designed to test what they knew about dietary fats. Questions dealt with the amount and types of fat contained in various foods and what the nutritional recommendations are regarding these fats. Participants were asked to answer "Don't know" rather than hazard a guess.

The first finding: French respondents admitted to not knowing the answer to 43% of the questions, while the equivalents for Quebec and the United States were 13% and 4% respectively. Fifty-five percent of French respondents said they did not know the percentage of fat in whole milk, compared with 5% for Quebec and 4% for the United States. The same trend was observed for butter, margarine, and vegetable

oils.

The second finding: when participants tried to answer, Americans were most likely to be right, followed by Quebecers, with the French bringing up the rear. And 6% of Quebecers, 9% of Americans, and 17% of the French did not know the recommendations regarding saturated and unsaturated fats in a healthy diet.

"The difference among respondents' knowledge," said Professor Doyon, "essentially indicates that the French don't take much of an interest in the nutrients contained in the foods they eat. The information is on the package, but they don't read it."

According to the researchers, the correlation found between extensive nutritional knowledge and high obesity rates suggests that focusing on detailed nutritional information may not be the best strategy for encouraging [healthy eating](#) habits.

"It's an approach that presents information to consumers in a broken down form," suggested Dr. Doyon. "This may lead them to think of [food](#) in terms of its fat, carbohydrate, and caloric content and lose sight of the whole picture. It might be better to focus on what constitutes a healthy, complete, and balanced meal."

Provided by Universite Laval

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