



Nutritional profile of plant-based breakfast cereals and ready-to-go snack food products available in Irish supermarkets

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Plant-based (PB) dietary patterns have a greater emphasis on foods derived from plants, while restricting animal-based foods. Research suggests that PB diets may lower the risk of non-communicable diseases⁽¹⁾ and be more sustainable⁽²⁾. Despite consumer perceptions of the nutritional benefits of PB food products⁽³⁾, the evidence to date suggests that PB alternatives may be nutritionally inferior to their animal-based counterparts. The aims of the current study were to evaluate the nutritional profile and the use of claims and marketing messages on PB breakfast cereals and ready-to-go snack food products available in Ireland.

Data was collected by a cross-sectional, online retail audit of Irish supermarkets. Search terms such as 'PB', 'vegan', 'vegetarian' and 'meat-free' were used to investigate the availability of breakfast cereals and ready-to-go snack food products within market-leading supermarket webpages. The nutritional profile was assessed by applying the food Traffic-Light model (TLM) to indicate if the fat, saturates, sugars and salt of the food per 100 g were high, medium or low. Similarly, fibre was categorised by applying the European Food Safety Authority's nutrition standard for labelling. Any marketing terms and/or regulated health and nutrition claims on the food labelling were also recorded.

Overall, the median nutrient levels of PB breakfast cereals (n = 43) were categorised as low in saturated fat (1.1g/100 g; SD = 4.37g) and salt (0.12g/100 g; SD = 0.35g); medium in fat (6.3g/100 g; SD = 11.53g) and total sugars (9.9g/100 g; SD = 6.94g); and high in fibre (8.8g/100 g; SD = 6.21g). For ready-to-go snack foods (n = 57), the median nutrient levels were categorised as high in fibre (7.8g/100 g; SD = 4.41g) and fat (22g/100 g; SD = 13.23g); medium in saturated fat (5g/100 g; SD = 4.36), total sugars (19g/100 g (SD = 16.33g), and salt (0.62g/100 g; SD = 0.72g). A range of 1–4 marketing messages were found on all breakfast cereal products (total n = 59) and all snack products (total n = 141). 'Vegan' was the most common marketing message on breakfast cereals (n = 40, 93% of products) and snacks (n = 54; 94.8%), compared to 'plant-based' on 16.3% (n = 7) and 26.4% (n = 15) of products respectively. Majority of breakfast cereals (n = 38, 88.4%) and snack products (n = 47, 82.5%) displayed at least one regulated nutritional claim with 'high in fibre' the most commonly used, 74.41% (n = 32) and 47.4% (n = 27) respectively.

In summary, PB food products overall were typically high in fibre but with medium levels of total sugars. All PB products displayed a range of marketing messages and claims. Further research is warranted to understand consumer perceptions of these PB food products, marketing message and claims. Future research should also consider the micronutrient composition of PB food products.

References

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