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Changing New Zealanders' Attitudes to Milk?

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Abstract

The long-term decline in milk consumption is a serious threat for the milk industry and for public health. This study investigated the relationship between consumer attitudes and milk consumption and the effects of TV advertising of milk.

Two random telephone surveys were conducted one year apart. Respondents reported their usual milk intake and beliefs about milk. In the second survey perceptions to milk advertising were also examined. GPs' views on milk were sought by mail questionnaire.

People's perceptions to milk broadly related to what was important in their lives; what threatens them physically and emotionally. Women were more positive about milk but were concerned about its fat content. Men were less aware of milk's nutritional benefits but were more conscious of men's health issues as evidenced by their greater concern about milk and cholesterol. Younger people were the least likely to view milk as good value for money and were more swayed by soft drinks.

Young European women consumed the least milk. Their low consumption was related to perceptions about body weight yet they liked the taste of milk. The TV advertising campaign that gained the most attention featured a Samoan rugby player. The campaign failed to appeal to the female target audience. Rather it appealed mostly to young Maori and Pacific Islands men who were already high milk consumers. There were some positive changes in beliefs as a result of the advertising but concerns about allergies, fat and cholesterol and the cost of milk were amplified. There was no evidence of any consequent change in milk consumption.

GPs' perceptions about milk were broadly similar to those of the general population. Their limited knowledge about the nutritional importance of milk suggests they are unlikely to promote increased consumption.

The findings indicate that to halt or reverse the decline, the milk industry must develop advertising strategies that have more relevance to consumers. Product innovations for specific usage occasions may help to grow consumption. There is an opportunity to maximise use of resources and form industry-health alliances. Further research is needed to understand the relevance of milk in consumer lifestyles.