

Introduction

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The Food Standards Agency's role and current position on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is set out on the Food Standards Agency (FSA) website^[1]. As stated, the FSA's main remit in relation to UPFs is to regulate additives, as well as having a role, alongside other government departments, in protecting consumer interests in relation to food. The agency tracks consumer perceptions in relation to food through regular research such as the Food and You 2 survey, and the Consumer Insights Tracker. The FSA's scope covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with Scotland covered by Food Standards Scotland (FSS).

The FSA has a statutory remit to act in the interests of consumers, and provide clear, evidence-based information, and therefore seeks to identify the most effective way of doing this.

The FSA accordingly commissioned the Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) working group on Wider Consumer Interests to scope and undertake a rapid evidence review. Bearing in mind the limitations of current research, an attempt was made to address the following research questions:

Consumer understanding and awareness

1. What do consumers understand by the concept of UPF?
2. Do consumers understand the current classifications of processed foods? How do consumers distinguish between different types of UPFs?
3. How do different consumer groups differ in their understanding and awareness of UPFs?

Consumer concerns and behaviours

4. What beliefs do consumers hold about the implications of ultra-processed food consumption (e.g. nutritional, health, sustainability)?
5. Do consumer beliefs differ by different types of UPFs?
6. What are the key drivers and/or influencing factors of consumer beliefs and practises around UPFs?
7. How do different consumer groups differ in their beliefs and practises around UPFs?

Consumer information needs

8. What are the information needs of consumers in the context of uncertainty over the nutritional and health impacts of UPFs and what is the role of risk communication?
9. How can the FSA best support consumers with respect to their concerns and related behaviours when it comes to UPFs?

Professor Henson led the work, with input from the Wider Consumer Interests Working Group, the wider ACSS, and FSA colleagues. This paper represents an initial ACSS view based on the emerging literature on UPFs. It has not sought to answer research questions 8 and 9 on consumer information needs and the nature of FSA support, and further detail on this is covered in the Conclusions section. The paper concludes by suggesting additional areas of research that FSA or other relevant organisations might wish to consider to inform thinking on UPFs.

It should not be taken to represent an ACSS or FSA position on the merits or otherwise of UPFs, or the implications of UPFs in the UK diet and health.

However, the ACSS does suggest that the FSA should commission UK (or England,

Wales and/or Northern Ireland) specific research into consumer views if it wishes to develop communication or policy approaches.

[1] Food Standards Agency website - Ultra-processed foods (2024)

<https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/ultra-processed-foods>