**Conflicting Nutrition Information and Consumer Confusion**

Is nutrition research’s “hot and cold” messaging contributing to the global obesity crisis? A recent series of studies, first beginning with Nagler in 2014, indicates that cumulative exposure to conflicting nutrition information (CNI) is associated with a decreased intent to practice healthy behaviours via an effect called *nutrition backlash* (Clark et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Nagler, 2014; Spiteri-Cornish & Moraes, 2015; Vijaykumar, 2021).



Nutrition backlash can be defined as negative beliefs about nutrition recommendations and science in general (Clark et al., 2018). Nagler’s (2014) original U.S. study found that exposure to CNI would lead to nutrition confusion, nutrition backlash, and ultimately a decrease in intent to practice even well-established health recommendations such as exercising and consuming fruits and vegetables. This study has been most recently replicated this year in the UK where Vijaykumar (2021) found that nutrition confusion and backlash were negatively associated with exercise and fruit/vegetable consumption respectively.

Despite public health campaigns to encourage healthy eating and exercise, obesity has been on the rise in Australia from 63% in 2013 to 67% in 2017 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018). In their exploratory, qualitative study, Spiteri-Cornish & Moraes (2015) found that while most study participants had the intent to eat healthily, they were confused by what should constitute a healthy diet. Many of these study participants also engaged in substituting behaviours where “unhealthy” foods were swapped for foods that were of no higher dietary quality yet were perceived to be healthier (Spiteri-Cornish & Moraes, 2015). These concerning findings indicate that people with healthy eating intentions may be missing the mark due to confusion about healthy eating. 

These findings have important implications in the delivery of not only nutrition messaging, but health messaging overall, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic. If people are overwhelmed by a plethora of conflicting information, will people turn away from the health recommendations of public health officials and scientists? More longitudinal research is needed to understand the widespread effects of cumulative exposure to conflicting information on health behaviours. As public health students and professionals, we can build from these studies to begin to understand the effect that a variety of health messages have on the public.

References:

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