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An investigation into dietitians' awareness and recommendations surrounding plant-based diets and plant-based dairy alternatives in Ireland

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Dietitians are responsible for advising patients on their dietary decisions and are expected to provide well-informed advice based on current research⁽¹⁾. In recent years, the interest in plant-based diets has surged⁽¹⁾, with 8% of the Irish population following a vegetarian diet and 2% adhering to a vegan diet⁽²⁾. A plant-based diet refers to a dietary pattern in which energy and nutrient requirements are predominately met through plant foods⁽³⁾.

The growth in consumption of plant-based drinks comes in response to increased consumer demand for cow's milk alternatives⁽¹⁾. Consumers report choosing plant-based alternatives over their dairy counterparts for various reasons, including ethical or health considerations⁽¹⁾. Therefore, gaining a better understanding of dietitians' knowledge and understanding of plant-based dairy alternatives is needed. The objective of this study is to evaluate dietitians' recommendations surrounding plant-based diets and to examine their level of understanding regarding plant-based dairy alternatives.

Participants were recruited through the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute, a healthcare professional newsletter, and a social media page. Data was collected using a 13-item questionnaire and descriptive statistics were performed using IBM SPSS to determine percentages.

Out of the 60 dietitians who participated in the study, 50% (n = 30) observed a rise in the number of patients following a plant-based diet, particularly among younger patients (28%, n = 17). The knowledge of plant-based dairy alternatives varied, with 15% (n = 9) of the dietitians rating their knowledge as low, 68% (n = 41) as moderate, and the remaining 17% (n = 10) perceiving their knowledge as high. The nutritional profile of plant-based milk raised concerns for most dietitians (92% n = 55), who highlighted calcium, protein, and iodine as the main nutrients of concern.

Over two-thirds (62%, n = 37) of dietitians cited allergy or intolerance as the primary reason they would recommend a plant-based dairy alternative to a patient, while an additional 13% (n = 8) stated for the management or prevention of chronic diseases.

Participants revealed that they acquire information on plant-based dairy alternatives from various sources. Scientific journals were the most common source (58%, n = 35) used, followed by advice from other healthcare professionals (50%, n = 30). Nevertheless, most of the participants (75%, n = 45) believe that there is insufficient information available to dietitians surrounding plant-based dairy alternatives. When asked about the resources they would like access to, more than half (57%, n = 34) stated that product comparisons would be a valuable source of information, while an additional 33% (n = 20) suggested that nutritional breakdowns would be helpful.

In conclusion, it can be acknowledged that there is a clear trend toward more people following a plant-based diet, especially among the younger generation. Furthermore, additional educational resources are needed in order to enhance dietitians' knowledge and understanding of plant-based dairy alternatives.

References

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