

research snapshot

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How Can Consumers Make Healthy Eating Choices?

What is this research about?

Consumer protection law and policy have tried to protect consumers mostly by facilitating the dissemination of information and raising awareness. In the area of healthy eating and obesity, consumer law has imposed nutrition labeling on food, so that people can make informed decisions and healthy food choices. Despite these efforts, more consumers are buying and eating unhealthy food. This research looks at the pros and cons of a new approach for encouraging healthy eating, known as “nudging”. Nudging consumers towards healthy eating is different from creating laws that try to force better food choices. The idea is to make healthy eating a convenient choice, without taking away the freedom to choose.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher examined the extent to which nudging can change what people choose to eat. He looked at studies that were done in the past to assess the usefulness of nudging. He also identified the drawbacks of this approach, and suggested other ideas that may help reduce obesity.

What you need to know:

“Nudging” consumers towards healthy food is not fully effective in getting people to eat well. A lack of education or a lack of income play a role in unhealthy food choices.

What did the researcher find?

An example of nudging is placing healthy food in the front of the supermarket, near the entrance. Another example is listing healthy food as the default option in the front of restaurant menus. Studies have shown that these methods increase healthy eating.

However, drawing on a critical review of the evidence, the researcher concluded that nudging only offers a temporary solution and a surface level change in the eating habits of people. It does not address the misperception many people have about what kind of food is healthy. For example, a survey showed that consumers estimate a hamburger presented with celery sticks has fewer calories than a meal with only a hamburger.

Moreover, nudging tactics can only benefit affluent citizens, and cannot help those with

low incomes. A study found a high rate of food insecurity (56%) among Latin Americans in Toronto. Low income consumers are likely to buy the food that is affordable and easy to find even in the presence of nudges that encourage healthy food choices. Nutrition is not necessarily a priority for those living on social assistance, facing language barriers and relying on food banks. Thus, nudging consumers towards healthy eating will only induce short-term change, while ignoring the underlying problems.

Consumers need to be better educated about healthy food. Low-income consumers also need a source of financial empowerment.

How can you use this research?

This research may be used by policymakers to understand consumer behaviour and enhance their decision making. Further research however, can look into how nudging effects consumers in a different setting than in this study. Professionals in health related work may run campaigns to raise awareness and increase consumer knowledge about nutrition and healthy choices.

About the Researcher

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