

Understanding of labelling terms 'Lactose free', 'Milk free' or 'Dairy free'

Area of research interest: [Food hypersensitivity](#)

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Background

There are currently no EU-wide rules on the use of claims to indicate the absence or reduction of lactose in foods. Therefore manufacturers across Europe can set their own management thresholds for labelling foods suitable for people with lactose intolerance and galactosaemia.

This means that the level of protection offered to consumers with these conditions varies between and within EU countries. For this reason the EU has requested that European Food Safety Authority issue an opinion on lactose intolerance and galactosaemia in order to inform the development of EU-wide legislation on the labelling of foods suitable for people with lactose intolerance and galactosaemia. This research was conducted to explore the terms 'lactose free', 'milk free' and 'dairy free' among consumers, health professionals and food businesses.

Research Approach

Sixty-three interviews, a mix of telephone and face to face, were conducted in total, half of these (32) were with consumers with the remainder split between health professionals (15) and food businesses (16).

Results

The research showed that labelling for people with a milk sensitivity has improved in recent years and consumers find specific claims helpful, but the key information that is scrutinised is still the ingredients list and specialised allergen information/advice statements.

Products described as 'lactose free' were generally assumed to be suitable for people with lactose intolerance. However, there was considerable uncertainty about whether or not they were suitable for people with a milk allergy or intolerance.

People with lactose intolerance were uncertain whether products described as 'dairy free' or 'milk free' were suitable for them.

'Dairy free' was the most widely used and understood term. It was understood to refer to the absence of both milk and products derived from milk, such as butter, yoghurt and cheese, although some mistakenly thought that such products were also free from eggs.

There was significant confusion about the term 'milk free', as this was thought by some to mean the absence of alternative 'milks' made from plants, such as soya or rice, as well as animal milks, but others thought that it only referred to cows' milk.

There was also confusion about whether 'milk free' products could contain butter, yoghurt and cheese or were just free from milk itself.

Consumers, health professionals and food businesses all agreed that there would need to be clear advice for consumers and health professionals to explain the meaning of any claims that might be governed by legislation.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

[View Understanding of Food Labelling Terms: Used to Indicate the Absence or Reduction of Lactose, Milk or Dairy as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (1.12 MB)