

Protein claims and nutrient profile in UK foods: a food market survey

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The use of nutrition claims is on the rise in many countries⁽¹⁾. These claims represent a form of marketing strategy in that they can influence dietary choices by helping consumers identify and select more nutritious foods. High protein intake is perceived as desirable for muscle development, weight loss and safety control⁽²⁾, posing an opportunity for food manufacturers to use protein content claims as a way to promote salutary dimensions of foods. The use of protein claims and the nutrient quality of foods that carry them needs scrutiny.

Objectives:

1. To explore the prevalence of protein claims on food packaging and the types of food that make these claims.
2. To assess their compliance with European regulations (Regulation (EC) 1924/2006 and their nutrition quality through Nutrient Profiling (NP) and Multiple Traffic Light Labelling (MTLL) analyses.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in 8 UK supermarkets in 2021 to identify all products carrying protein claims. Nutrient content was recorded from food labels. Protein contents were evaluated to examine if products complied with European Regulations (high protein $\geq 20\%$ of total energy content comes from protein and source of protein when this is $\geq 12\%$). The Ofcom NP model was used to calculate the proportion of “healthy” products, and MTLL analyses assessed nutritional content of all products surveyed. Descriptive statistics were used for analyses.

1,200 products displaying protein claims were identified (44% “source of protein”, 40% “high protein” and 16% as “other protein claims”). Protein claims were found across 20 different food and non-alcoholic drink categories, mostly meat and meat products ($n = 175$, 15%), meat and meat product alternatives ($n = 191$, 16%) and composite ready-to-eat meals ($n = 172$, 14%). From products carrying a “source of protein” claim ($n = 531$), only 513 were correctly classified, whereas 351 out of 428 products with a high protein claim were correctly classified. Overall, 75% of products surveyed were classified as “healthy” and 25% as “less healthy”. Meat and meat products, crisp, nut and seed style snacks, cheese as well as cereal/nutrition bars and snacks were significantly less healthy ($p < 0.001$) mainly due to being higher in salt, fat and saturated fat.

Protein claims are highly prevalent across a wide range of foods and beverages sold in the UK, with most of them falling under “high protein” claims. Whilst more than half of products surveyed were classified as healthy, many remained higher in salt, fat and saturated fat, presenting an issue if the potential masking effects from increased protein content mislead consumers and encourage them to consume unhealthy food choices.

References

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2. Moon J & Koh G (2020) *J Obes Metal Syndrome* **29**, 166–73.