NUTRITION & Health

WHAT'S NEW...

Food choice and eating behaviour

A conference for health and nutrition professionals

21ST APRIL 2026

W5, ODYSSEY
BELFAST

The Dairy Council for Northern Ireland

NUTRITION & Health

WHAT'S NEW . . .

PROGRAMME

5:00pm Arrival of delegates and refreshments

5:45pm **Professor Sean Strain, OBE**
ULSTER UNIVERSITY
Chairperson's introduction

5:50pm **Dr Anestis Dougkas**
INSTITUT LYFE RESEARCH & INNOVATION CENTRE, LYON
Beyond nutrients: sensory perception, dairy foods, and their role in enhancing sustainable diets

6:20pm **Dr Suzanne Spence**
NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY
When policy meets preference: school food choices through policy, environment and pupils at the centre

6:50pm **Professor Marion Hetherington**
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
Loss of appetite in older adults: comparing food first and oral nutritional supplements to prevent and treat malnutrition

7:20pm **Dr Ruth Price**
ULSTER UNIVERSITY
Targeting the brain: how surgery and medications for obesity reshape the way we eat

7:50pm **Q&A**

8:00pm Close

Professor Sean Strain, OBE

NICHE, ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Chairperson's introduction

Sean Strain is Emeritus Professor of Human Nutrition at Ulster University. He is the founder and former director of the Nutrition Innovation Centre for Food and Health (NICHE) at Ulster. He is an author of over 300 peer-reviewed research publications and has attracted over £38M in external research funding during his career.

In 2002, he was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He is a Fellow and former President of The Nutrition Society, and in 2014 he was awarded an OBE for services to nutrition research and education. He was President of the Board of the European Nutrition Leadership Programme, Vice-Chairman, Panel on Dietetic Products, Nutrition and Allergies (NDA), Chairman of the NDA Working Group on Claims, European Food Safety Authority, and Chair of the International Science Advisory Panel for the New Zealand Government funded, High Value Nutrition Programme.

Dr Anestis Dougkas

RESEARCH CENTRE OF THE INSTITUT LYFE

Anestis Dougkas is Director of Nutrition and Eating Behaviour at the Research Centre of the Institut Lyfe (formerly Institut Paul Bocuse) in Lyon, France. His research explores how the nutritional and sensory properties of foods influence appetite regulation, food intake and health outcomes in both healthy and clinical populations.

He completed his PhD in Human Nutrition at the University of Reading (UK), focusing on dairy consumption, obesity risk and appetite regulation through epidemiological and intervention studies. He subsequently conducted postdoctoral research at Lund University (Sweden) on protein quality and appetite control.

His current work integrates nutrition, sensory science and eating behaviour, with interests in sustainable diets and sensory alterations in clinical populations. He is a member of ASN, NS, EASO and an alumnus of the European Nutrition Leadership Platform.

Beyond nutrients: sensory perception, dairy foods, and their role in enhancing sustainable diets

When we think about healthy eating, we often focus on nutrients such as protein and vitamins, or calories. But we all know that how food tastes, smells, and feels in the mouth, known as sensory perception, matters just as much as its nutrients and shapes our food choices and long-term eating habits. Humans are naturally drawn to pleasurable foods, and this "liking" (or hedonics) plays a key role in what we choose to eat every day (Drewnowski & Almiron-Roig, 2010).

Dairy foods such as milk, yoghurt, and cheese are good examples of how sensory qualities matter. They offer a wide range of textures (creamy, smooth, firm), flavours (mild to intense), and aromas that can enhance meals. Their versatility in cooking, whether melting, foaming, or fermenting, makes them adaptable ingredients across many cuisines. Compared with some plant-based alternatives, dairy products often have more complex textures and flavours due to natural fat structure and fermentation processes, which can influence satisfaction and enjoyment (McCarthy et al., 2017).

While plant-based eating is on the rise for its environmental and health benefits (Willett et al., 2019), completely removing animal products may make it harder for some people to meet nutritional needs (e.g., calcium, vitamin B12) or maintain enjoyment of food. Including moderate amounts of dairy, by sprinkling cheese on some vegetables, or pairing yoghurt with fruit or nuts, can help bridge this gap, providing key nutrients while maintaining palatability and dietary balance (Comerford et. al., 2021).

Although limited, research also suggests that adding small amounts of dairy to plant-based meals may encourage people to eat more plant foods. For example, cheese or yoghurt can improve the taste and acceptability of vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, increasing their consumption, especially among individuals who might otherwise find these foods less appealing (Donelly et al., 2010). This "sensory enhancement" can be an effective strategy for improving diet quality without sacrificing enjoyment.

From a health perspective, dairy consumption has been linked to positive outcomes such as improved bone health and a reduced risk of certain chronic diseases when consumed as part of a balanced diet (Akyl et al., 2025). At the same time, combining dairy with plant-based foods could encourage sustainable dietary patterns that aim to balance nutrition, enjoyment, and environmental impact.

Ultimately, building healthier and more sustainable diets is not only about nutrients, but it is also about pleasure. By understanding how sensory perception shapes our food choices, and by using foods like dairy strategically, we can create diets that people enjoy, adhere to, and benefit from in the long term.

Dr Suzanne Spence

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

Suzanne Spence is a Lecturer in Public Health Nutrition at Newcastle University. Her research focuses on how School Food Systems shape what children and young people eat, particularly in secondary schools. She has studied the impact of Universal Free School Meals, the effectiveness of School Food Standards, and is interested in how availability, pricing and the wider school food environment influence pupils' choices.

Suzanne is also interested in how policy and school based interventions can help improve pupils' food and drink decisions throughout the school day. Her work centres on involving stakeholders from pupils to policymakers. She has received external funding for this research, both as PI and Co-I, and contributes academic expertise to several school food bodies, including the School Food Plan and the APPG on School Food.

When policy meets preference: school food choices through policy, environment and pupils at the centre

Improving children's dietary intake remains a persistent public health challenge, with evidence showing that children's diets do not meet several recommended nutritional guidelines. Schools, however, represent an opportune setting for intervention: pupils consume a substantial proportion of their daily intake during the school day, and school food policy has the potential to influence dietary intakes. This talk will consider school food policy intent and pupil preference, exploring why school food policies may not always translate into healthier choices in practice.

The presentation will begin by reviewing school food policy across the UK, including the implementation of food and nutrient based standards and the available evidence on their impact. While these policies provide a strong foundation, their effectiveness is shaped by the wider school food environment. The influence of contextual factors such as dining spaces, queuing systems, and broader school food system elements that influence what pupils choose to eat will be considered. The talk will also explore pupil choice, highlighting the complex system of drivers from taste, familiarity, peer influence, to perceived value that shape young people's decisions.

Finally, opportunities for progress will be identified, ensuring that pupils' experiences, and their health and learning, remain central to school food improvement efforts.

Professor Marion Hetherington

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Marion Hetherington is Professor Emerita in Biopsychology, University of Leeds, and an Affiliate Professor in Nutritional Sciences, Pennsylvania State University. Marion trained in experimental psychology at the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford, then held postdoctoral fellowships at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, USA.

She has more than 30 years of experience researching human appetite across the lifespan and is a specialist in the psychology of food choice and food acceptance. Until 2025 she was Editor in Chief of the journal Appetite and was trustee of the Give A Child A Hope charity working in partnership with the Revival Centre, Matugga, Uganda providing education and support to disadvantaged children.

Loss of appetite in older adults: comparing food first and oral nutritional supplements to prevent and treat malnutrition

Advice about diet and nutrition at the population level may be unsuitable for older adults who experience unintended weight loss and may be at risk of malnutrition (Dent et al., 2023). Losing weight with age is often perceived as normal and even desirable. However, in the UK around one in ten people aged 65 and over are currently malnourished or at risk of malnutrition (Malnutrition Task Force 2021). Therefore, the current focus of public health messaging on obesity may be misplaced for some older adults, especially those at risk of malnutrition. Advice to older adults from the NHS and the charity sector such as Age UK, advocate prevention of malnutrition through a "food first" approach (Dunne, 2007).This approach is favoured by professional associations such as the British Dietetic Association (BDA).

A "food first" (FF) approach promotes consumption of a well-balanced diet, eating little and often, and adding more protein sources as well as nutrient dense and high energy (full fat) foods into the diets of older adults. FF approaches are appealing as they supplement already familiar and liked foods with high nutrient and energy dense ingredients. However, one of the causes of malnutrition among older adults is loss of appetite, which may be related to underlying inflammation and other disease states or due to anorexia of ageing (Dent et al., 2023). For those experiencing poor appetite, oral nutritional supplements (ONS) may be prescribed. The effectiveness of ONS is dependent on good adherence rates. If prescriptions are followed ONS can assist older adults with energy intake and ultimately weight gain. Systematic reviews indicate that adherence is generally poor. Reasons for this are many and complex.

Our research has been designed to explore and compare attitudes to ONS and FF approaches both through small-scale qualitative studies with older adults and a large-scale, quantitative online study with adults varying in age. Our qualitative research identified several benefits and barriers to taking ONS by healthy older adults (Hetherington et al., 2024). Our quantitative research clearly demonstrated differences between older and younger adults in their attitudes towards food first compared with oral nutritional supplements.

In this presentation, an overview of appetite loss in older adults will be given and then potential benefits and barriers to ONS and FF approaches will be considered.

Dr Ruth Price

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Ruth Price is a Research Fellow and Clinical Trials Manager at Ulster University's Nutrition Innovation Centre for Food and Health (NICHE), with more than 25 years' experience delivering complex human trials and first in human metabolic studies. Her research focuses on obesity, appetite regulation and the objective measurement of eating behaviour.

She has played a central role in advancing understanding of the mechanisms of action underlying bariatric surgery by shifting reliance in this field from verbal self-reports to robust, objective approaches that directly capture how treatments alter ingestive behaviour. Ruth's current work includes supporting a major European Commission–funded initiative delivering an obesity care programme to 9,000 patients in the northwest of Ireland.

Targeting the brain: how surgery and medications for obesity reshape the way we eat

This presentation explores how treatments for obesity, particularly gastric bypass surgery and obesity medications, change the way people eat by acting directly on brain systems that regulate appetite, fullness, and the enjoyment of food.

A key conceptual framework underpinning the presentation is that eating has two main components: **appetitive behaviour,** which relates to cravings, food thoughts, and the motivation to begin eating, and, **consummatory behaviour**, which determines how much food is eaten once a meal has started and when eating stops. These phases of eating are regulated by interacting **homeostatic and hedonic systems** that balance energy needs and food reward, and are influenced by a combination of gut derived signals and neural circuits involved in reward valuation, motivation, learning, and inhibitory control. Understanding which aspects of eating are affected by different treatments helps explain how they work and supports the development of evidence based dietetic guidance.

Roux en Y gastric bypass leads to significant and long lasting changes in eating behaviour. Work from our group has challenged the long held belief that gastric bypass works mainly by encouraging people to choose "healthier" foods. Instead, objective studies conducted in controlled residential settings show that surgery primarily changes **how food is consumed rather than what is consumed**. Following surgery, people eat more slowly, feel full earlier, and consume substantially smaller meals, with little change in how often eating is initiated. These behavioural changes are supported by marked alterations in gut–brain signalling, including increased secretion of satiety hormones such as GLP 1, oxyntomodulin, and PYY, alongside reduced ghrelin levels. Importantly, these reductions in energy intake occur without major changes in overall food choice, meaning individuals largely eat less of the same foods, despite commonly reporting altered tastes or preferences. In contrast, equivalent investigations in pharmacotherapy trials are limited. Short term studies suggest that GLP 1–based treatments can reduce food intake to a similar degree as surgery, primarily through smaller meals and earlier meal termination. Neuroimaging studies further indicate that these treatments selectively reduce activation in reward related brain regions in response to high energy foods, particularly early in treatment. However, it remains unclear whether these brain changes drive changes in eating behaviour or simply reflect them, and there is a notable absence of long term objective studies.

Overall, the presentation highlights that effective obesity treatments reshape eating behaviour through central biological mechanisms that influence hunger, satiety, and food reward, while emphasising critical gaps in our understanding, particularly in relation to pharmacological interventions. The presentation also underscores the importance of using objective measures of eating behaviour in obesity research and summarises the current evidence base informing dietetic guidance during obesity treatment.

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