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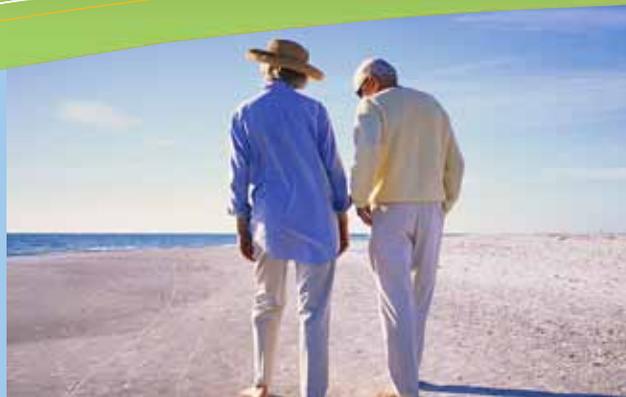


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## Potential benefits of ready meal reformulation for the elderly

### Background

The term “ready meals” describes entire meals that can be purchased to replace a main course of individually prepared components. Ready meals normally only require some reheating or cooking. Their popularity has increased markedly in recent years and a growing and diverse range of both chilled and frozen products can now be purchased by the consumer.

It is well known that diet plays an important role in preventing or promoting the development of many diseases including heart disease, cancers, diabetes and obesity. For example, foods rich in saturated fats and salt may increase risk of heart disease and stroke. Unfortunately, in relation to current nutritional guidelines, many ready meals have high levels of these ingredients.<sup>1</sup>

However, the ready meal format also offers reformulation opportunities for manufacturers to provide the consumer with a convenience food with an optimum content of essential nutrients to benefit health. Convenience foods such as pizzas have been innovatively redesigned in accordance with nutritional guidelines and are now available in the market place (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-18663969>).

In order to ascertain the health impact of such a reformulation agenda for ready meals, in the first place it is important to establish which sectors of the population are the most prolific purchasers of these products. Here we report on buying patterns of ready meals extracted from consumer information (provided by TNS Global Kanter Worldpanel Market Research) on supermarket and household purchasing.

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“Perhaps unsurprisingly, as ready meals are designed for one or two people.....”

### Ready meal consumption trends

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as ready meals are designed for one or two people, they appear most popular in one and two person households without children. Presumably there is less incentive to take time to prepare a meal from individually purchased ingredients when cooking for oneself or without the domestic responsibility of a larger family to feed (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Purchasing of ready meals in relation to number of members in the household

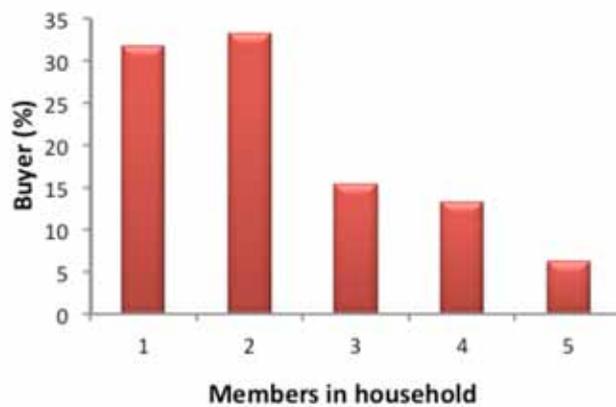
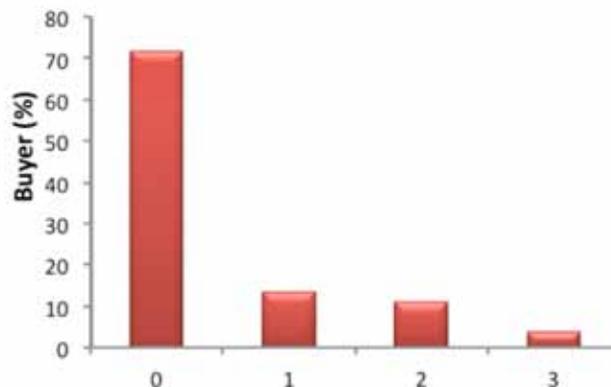
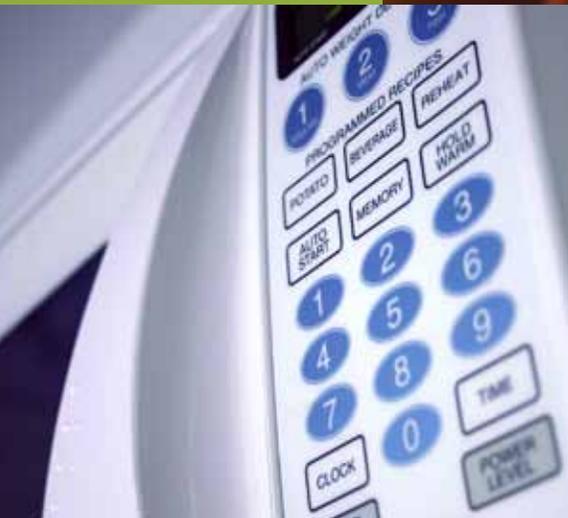


Figure 2. Purchasing of ready meals in relation to number of children in the household





“.....27% of the population buying ready meals are classed as “single elderly”

Purchasing of ready meals is intuitively associated with the young consumer whose lifestyle may not give domestic and culinary skills the greatest priority. Consequently the observation that the largest group (27%) purchasing ready meals are classed as “single elderly” was unexpected (Figure 3). Empirically one might assume that this age group has more traditional culinary habits. However, it should also be born in mind that the single elderly may not have the mobility or desire to regularly cook complex meals with several ingredients on a daily basis.

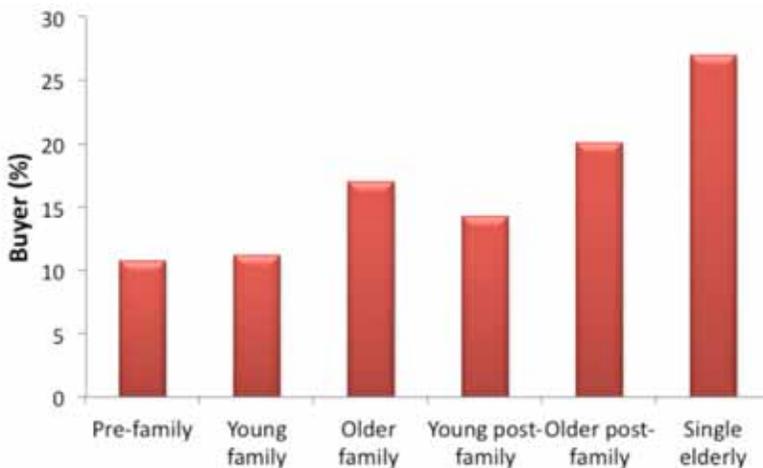


Figure 3. Purchasing of ready meals in relation to lifecycle

## Commentary

An increase in ready meal market penetration is due to food manufacturers responding to socio-cultural changes. These include an increase in small families and single households, unstructured mealtimes, an increase in dual income families thus creating time and stress pressures, and a lack of cooking skills and knowledge to prepare basic meals<sup>2</sup>.

Many companies are now reviewing their product formulation having sought alternative ways to meet sensory perceptions without compromising on health attributes. A policy led innovative reformulation agenda, such as that in Scotland, which satisfies both commercial pressures and population health is an obvious priority.



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We undertake research to address contemporary problems in nutrition, which makes a significant contribution to increased scientific knowledge, underpins Government policies and informs innovation for industry.

Such an approach may particularly benefit the elderly who appear to be significant purchasers of ready meals. An ageing population increases demands on societal and health budgets and the elderly can be particularly vulnerable to compromised nutrient status. In addition to inadequate intakes of key micronutrients such as vitamins D, B12, and B6 and calcium, there is growing concern about the overconsumption of sodium (salt) by the over 70s.<sup>3</sup> In addition, often ready meals are energy dense (providing a large number of calories per gram) whilst being nutrient poor. Reformulation of ready meals to increase the density of selected micronutrients while simultaneously decreasing salt content and animal fats may be particularly beneficial to older people<sup>4</sup>.

## References

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