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Focus on food instead of nutrients improves consumers' understanding of meals' nutrition quality

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Background: Nowadays, most of the information directed to consumers focuses on nutrients, ignoring the impact of the interactions between different foods, origin or degree of processing. The methodologies currently applied have led consumers to confuse foods with nutrients, meat and fish are often referred to as “proteins”, grains and potatoes are referred to as “carbohydrates, forgetting that these foods are source of other nutrients, such as fat, proteins or fibre. Furthermore, its efficacy is compromised by the difficulties of reading labels among consumers.

Objectives: This study aimed to evaluate the understanding about food and nutritional information presented in menus to consumers, comparing the nutrient-focused approach (Nutrition Declaration) and the new food-focused approach (infographic - based on the Portuguese food Guide, from previous research).

Methods: 4 different meals were created, 2 balanced and complete in terms of food and nutrient content and 2 unbalanced and incomplete. A questionnaire was applied, evaluating the understanding of the balance and healthiness of the meals, using the two approaches (nutrient-focused and food-focused). The order of presentation of the approaches and the meals was randomized for all participants. The questionnaire was distributed online through snowball sampling.

Results: 221 individuals participated, mostly female (67%), aged 25 to 54 years old. Evaluation of meals (“how balanced” and “how complete” the meal is) using the Nutrition Declaration did not allow to distinguish the quality of meals (Mb = 3,8;Mc=4,0), in opposite the Infographic returned significant differences between M1/M2 (Mb = 4,3;Mc=4,4) and M3/M4 (Mb = 2,5;Mc=2,6) ($p < 0.01$) allowing consumers to perceive differences between meals. The percentage of consumers that respond “I don't know” to these questions decreased using the food-focused tool (13% vs 2%).

Conclusions: The food-focused approach allows for better understanding of meals' nutritional balance.

Key messages:

- The infographic provides more information about the daily food portions and how different meals and types of food contribute for complying food and nutritional recommendations.
- The use of the infographic in menus, recipes, cookbooks and clinical advice may improve better food choices and a healthier lifestyle.