NEXT-FOOD-MT:

What Adolescents and Their Parents Know, See, and Choose About Food

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NEXT-FOOD-MT *is Malta's first national study to examine what adolescents know, see, and choose about food in their everyday lives. Led by* ***Prof. Sarah Cuschieri****, the project explores 13- to 15-year-old students' understanding of front-of-pack labels alongside the school, neighbourhood, and home environments that shape their choices. Working with students, parents, and teachers, it moves beyond what young people eat to understand how their food decisions are formed. In doing so, it aims to generate evidence that can support more realistic education and policies for a healthier generation.*

The origins of NEXT-FOOD-MT do not lie in a single moment of inspiration, but in a gradual realisation that Malta's obesity figures could not be understood through statistics alone. Malta's first (and last, to date) nationally representative Health Examination Survey, conducted in 2015–2016 by Prof. Sarah Cuschieri, revealed that approximately 70% of adults lived with excess weight or obesity – a scale that points to systemic rather than purely individual drivers. For Cuschieri from UM's Department of Anatomy (Faculty of Medicine & Surgery), the findings from NEXT-FOOD-MT raised deeper questions about how such patterns persist across generations.

'Obesity in Malta is not a marginal or individual issue. It is a systemic, population-level problem,' she explains. 'The data told us how big the problem was, but not why it continues.'

Subsequent research under her supervision provided another critical insight: many adults in Malta struggle to interpret front-of-pack food labels in a meaningful way. Rather than being a neutral source of information, labels can be confusing, misleading, or simply ignored. This finding was pivotal in shaping the direction of NEXT-FOOD-MT.

'If adults struggle to navigate food information, adolescents growing up within these same food environments may be even more disadvantaged,' Cuschieri notes. 'They are learning from parents, shopping in the same stores, and being exposed to the same marketing, yet often with less experience and less critical awareness.'

For her, this made the case for NEXT-FOOD-MT unquestionable.

'NEXT-FOOD-MT was a deliberate next step to move upstream from outcomes to root causes,' she says. 'We wanted to examine how food labelling, home environments, and school contexts interact during adolescence – a formative stage during which long-term dietary behaviours are established.'

The project frames adolescence as a critical window of opportunity – a moment when education, environment, and policy can align to support healthier lifelong habits.

WHAT STUDENTS KNOW: FOOD LABEL LITERACY

At the heart of NEXT-FOOD-MT is a close examination of what 13- to 15-year-old students genuinely understand about food labels – not in theory, but in practice. The study asks how adolescents interpret front-of-pack labelling, whether they trust it, and whether they actually use it when choosing foods.

Crucially, this is not assessed in a vacuum. Label literacy is explored in the contexts where decisions actually occur: in supermarkets, at home, in school canteens, and in the shops surrounding schools.

'We are not interested in whether students can memorise what a label means for an exam,' Cuschieri explains. 'We want to know how they interpret that information when they are standing in front of a shelf, influenced by price, branding, convenience, and peer preferences.'

This perspective challenges a common assumption in public health that knowledge alone leads to healthier behaviour. NEXT-FOOD-MT instead recognises that understanding interacts with context, marketing, and social norms. For example, a student may know that a product is high in sugar, yet still choose it if it is cheaper, more visible, or more socially desirable than healthier alternatives. By capturing this tension, the study moves beyond simplistic ideas of education as a cure-all.

WHAT STUDENTS SEE: SCHOOL AND NEIGHBOURHOOD FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

Malta's built environment presents a distinctive challenge for healthy living. The country is densely populated, highly urbanised, and saturated with food outlets. For many students, fast food shops, kiosks, convenience stores, and supermarkets are located just steps away from school gates.

Rather than treating this as background context, NEXT-FOOD-MT places it at the centre of analysis. The project systematically maps food environments surrounding schools, documenting what adolescents are exposed to daily – what is available, what is visible, and what is heavily marketed. This mapping is then linked to students' perceptions and behaviours. Do they see healthier options as accessible? Do they feel surrounded by unhealthy choices? How does this shape their sense of what is 'normal' to eat?

'We are not looking at food choice as something that happens in a vacuum,' says Cuschieri. 'We are asking how young people interpret food information in environments where unhealthy options are often more accessible, more visible, and more aggressively promoted.'

By grounding the research in Malta's real urban landscape, NEXT-FOOD-MT aims to produce evidence that can inform not only education but also urban planning, school policies, and food environment regulation.

FAMILIES, SHOPPING, AND THE HOME FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Adolescents do not shop, cook, or eat alone. Families play a central role in shaping which foods are bought, prepared, and made available at home, as well as how food is talked about and valued. NEXT-FOOD-MT, therefore, includes parents as key participants. It explores how they interpret food labels, how they shop, and how these practices influence what ends up in kitchen cupboards and school lunchboxes. Cuschieri is careful to frame this not as a search for blame, but as an effort to understand real-world constraints.

'Many families are doing their best within the realities they face – price pressures, time constraints, and the dominance of imported packaged foods,' she explains. 'Our role is to understand these dynamics so that policies and education can genuinely support healthier choices, rather than simply telling families what they should do.'

This family dimension is essential because food habits are often transmitted across generations. If parents normalise certain products or routines, adolescents are likely to carry those patterns forward into adulthood. By studying both generations together, NEXT-FOOD-MT captures this intergenerational dynamic rather than treating adolescents as isolated decision-makers. The

Prof. Sarah Cuschieri
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

findings from this study also inspired Cuschieri to develop *From The Doctor's Kitchen: Simple Local Healthy Food Explained*, an evidence-based cookbook created in her own time to help families make healthier food choices through simple, affordable, and locally inspired recipes grounded in nutritional and epidemiological science.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS IN SHAPING CHANGE

One of the most distinctive features of NEXT-FOOD-MT is the central role given to Home Economics teachers. These teachers occupy a unique position between curriculum and lived reality. They see firsthand how students understand nutrition in class, where misconceptions persist, and how lessons translate, or fail to translate, into real-life food choices outside school. As a result, the project positions teachers as active partners whose classroom experience shapes the research itself.

'Home Economics educators operate at the interface between curriculum intent and classroom reality,' says Cuschieri. 'Their feedback helps us distinguish between what is theoretically sound and what can realistically be implemented within Malta's education system.'

Through focus groups, teachers provide practical insights into how food literacy is currently taught, what challenges they face in terms of time and resources, and what changes might better support students' decision-making.

Their involvement ensures that NEXT-FOOD-MT's recommendations will not be purely academic. Instead, they will be grounded, feasible, and relevant to the everyday realities of Maltese classrooms.

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TAILORED TO A SMALL ISLAND

NEXT-FOOD-MT is deliberately interdisciplinary, bringing together public health, education, and policy perspectives. Led by Cuschieri, the project includes collaboration with Prof. Stefano Moncada from UM's Islands and Small States Institute and Prof. Jason Gilliland of Western University, Canada, a global expert in youth food environments.

This collaboration reflects the complexity of adolescent nutrition itself. Health outcomes, educational practices, and environmental exposures cannot be separated if the goal is meaningful change.

The study is also explicitly tailored to Malta's small-state context. High population density, reliance on imported foods, and close proximity between homes, schools, and commercial outlets create a distinctive setting in which multiple influences intersect in daily life.

'We are not looking at diet in isolation,' Cuschieri emphasises. 'We are examining how knowledge, environments, families, schools, and policies intersect to shape everyday choices.'

By combining data from students, parents, teachers, and mapped food environments, NEXT-FOOD-MT captures these interactions with a level of detail rarely possible in larger countries. This integrated design is what makes it one of the most comprehensive adolescent nutrition studies ever conducted in Malta – and potentially a model for other small island states facing similar challenges.

TOWARDS A HEALTHIER GENERATION

As fieldwork unfolds across Malta and Gozo, NEXT-FOOD-MT is expected to inform national strategies in health, education, and food policy. The study will provide Malta's first national evidence base on adolescent food label literacy and school food environments, while strengthening collaboration between researchers, educators, and policymakers.

Rather than producing a single intervention, the project aims to catalyse a broader shift in how Malta approaches adolescent nutrition.

'The legacy of NEXT-FOOD-MT is not one programme,' Cuschieri reflects. 'It is about empowering young people with critical skills while also shaping environments that make healthier choices easier.'

In a country where food is deeply woven into culture and daily life, understanding what students know, see, and choose about food may prove to be one of the most important steps Malta can take towards a healthier, more resilient future.

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NEXT-FOOD-MT is financed by Xjenza Malta, through the 'R&I Thematic Programmes: Obesity Research Programme' in collaboration with the Ministry for Health and Active Ageing.