

HERBAL MEDICINES • DIRECT MARKETING
ROLE OF PHARMACY IN HEALTHCARE
TEA • ORGANIC FOOD • ALLERGY LABELLING
HSE CONSUMER SATISFACTION
TESTS: SUNCREAMS • CHILD CAR SEATS
LADIES' HAIR REMOVAL

consumer choice

The Magazine of the Consumers' Association of Ireland

Herbal medicine
goes mainstream

JUNE
2008

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ASSOCIATION OF
IRELAND (CAI)**

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*To independently protect, promote and represent
the interests of consumers.*

Editorial & Contents

June 2008



The change to barrier-free tolling on our roads is long overdue and has been eagerly awaited. However, it is now coming at a cost, and with criteria that are unreasonable and anti-consumer in their application.

No opportunity has been lost in fleecing the already overburdened motorist and traveller. For example, the occasional user will now be paying more – much more! One reason for this is the cost involved in putting 'eFlow' into daily operation. That occasional untagged and unregistered user will have their number plate recorded on camera and will be required to pay before 8pm on the following day. If they do not pay in time, a notice will issue by post charging the toll fee – an unacceptably high €3 plus a further €3 administration charge. When unpaid, 10 days later another notice will issue adding a further penalty of €40 payable within 56 days.

So, an unregistered consumer going through the toll en route to the airport for a well-earned fortnight's holiday will return to find a notice of an outstanding toll charge of €46.

Add to this daft dilemma the ridiculous waste of time, postage and other resources spent in invoicing citizens, not to mention a likely unprecedented rate of defaulters, bad debts and tied up court resources and you begin to see the emerging picture. Not a pretty one, is it?

Dermott Jewell *CEO*

OUR REPORTS

Reports in *Consumer Choice* are based on market research, laboratory tests or user surveys, all of which are independently and scientifically conducted. Free goods are never accepted for testing – all samples are purchased.

The reports are produced in the main by our own Editorial staff. Some material is occasionally drawn from other foreign independent consumer magazines.

Because *Consumer Choice* carries no commercial advertising it is not swayed by bias or influence and can point out advantages and flaws in goods and services that other magazines may not be able to do.

Reports on any article relate only to the articles or goods mentioned, and not to any other article of the same or similar description. We do not necessarily price or report on all brands or models within the class, and the exclusion of any brand or model should not be taken as a reflection on it.

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Cover

iStockPhoto



205



209



211



216



223



239

News briefs	204
Herbal medicine We look at herbalist qualification and regulation in Ireland	205
Dealing with junk mail How to stay off those marketing lists	209
Pharmacy advice Are consumers over-reliant on local pharmacists?	211
Tea In search of the perfect cuppa	214
Organic food Is it worth the higher prices?	216
Allergies and labels What to watch out for when you shop	220
Staying safe in the sun Skin protection for the summer	223
Child car seats Keeping young passengers safe	227
Hair today, gone tomorrow! We test ladies' hair removal products	232
Currents A step in the right direction Pet salmonella Plain speaking Seeing purple Water footprint	236
Health service satisfaction Do surveys tell the whole story?	238
Writing the situation Our occasional letters page	239
What am I to do? Mobile madness	240

COMING SOON

Some of the reports we plan for you:

- A-Z of cosmetics
- Animal cloning
- Baggage costs
- Bargain food shelf
- Buying online
- Credit crunch
- Digital camcorders
- Dishwashers
- Euro NCAP car safety
- Folic acid
- Food fortification
- Green labelling
- Identity theft
- Meat origin
- Mp3 and Mp4 players
- Music downloads
- SLR cameras
- Steam irons
- Superfoods
- Tooth enamel
- Yoga explained

INDEX
Indexes are printed in the April, July, October and December issues of *Consumer Choice*. Turn to p149 in the April issue for the complete index of reports from January to March 2008.



Every Little Helps

Ethical Consumer recently reported that two of the UK's four top supermarkets will not commit to sourcing their eggs from cage-free providers. Tesco and ASDA have given no indication of any move to meet this consumer demand. Several other suppliers are already cage-free, including M&S, Waitrose and Co-op. Tesco, which requires over 3.5 million hens to lay its required supply each year, is being particularly targeted by the Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) group. The CIWF draws attention to the significance of a cage-free commitment to the welfare of so many millions of birds. Well done the CIWF.

Sale of the Century – literally!

I am, as always, delighted to outline to you the joy of advertising gaffes as illustrated so well by our colleagues in the Australian Consumer Association in their magazine *Choice*. The special offer from Pizza Hut that expired on 30 February was beaten off very effectively by Georges Cameras and Hi-Fi store who extended their deadline to 31 February. But it was the warnings on the packaging of QQdolls that especially resonated, as they included: 'Prevent the enclosure of the toy from being eaten by children' and the striking advice to 'Please keep the plastics package well, it causes suffocating to prevent children from playing'. I'm sure it would!

Bottle Banking


PepsiCo inc. is the latest US company to announce its intention to reduce the amount of plastic it uses in a variety of products. The company's new half-litre bottle will contain at most 20% less plastic than its predecessor. These bottles will be used for Lipton Ice Tea, Tropicana and water drinks. Clearly intent upon attracting consumer attention through such environmentally progressive measures, PepsiCo joins with Coca-Cola and Nestlé in these 'concerned' activities. That said, the 'concern' would also spill over into competition and loss of market share which would better reflect the environment of profit that is really the concern here!

A POWER OF GOOD

One of the most interesting green gadgets to come on to the market in recent times is the HYmini universal charger and adaptor. This is a small handheld windmill device that captures wind, solar and electrical power to allow you charge your mobile, MP3 and digital devices without any installation or software. There is also a small solar panel unit that connects to the charger to harness sunlight energy. Visit hymini.com if you are interested in the specifics.

Common Market Prices

Looking back at a survey of food prices carried out by colleagues at the Consumer Council in Hong Kong presents interesting reading from an Irish point of view. The Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department recorded price increases for the twelve months ended September 2007 and found huge increases. For example, eggs increased in price by 35% and fresh pork by a not dissimilar 33%. Best quality beef increased by 26% and chicken and fresh fruit by as much as 16%. In addition a significant number of price discounts and offers were removed by retailers. Shoppers there have been told to be price conscious and to – yes, you guessed it - shop around!

News by
Dermott Jewell 



Herbal medicine

Complementary therapists are unregulated in Ireland. We look at this issue in relation to herbalists. Also, many herbal remedies can be bought over-the-counter, while other remedies are restricted to prescription only. Regulation of over-the-counter herbal remedies is changing in Europe. Will this protect or restrict consumer choice - or both?

The use of herbs for healing is an ancient practice. But a long tradition of use does not mean herbal remedies can be used with less caution than conventional medicine.

Consumers who veer towards complimentary therapies will often not just use conventional or alternative medicine, but both depending on the health problem. Complementary therapies may be termed 'alternative' in cases where they are used instead of conventional medicine. The relationship can also depend on the nature of the ailment. Complementary therapies are more often used to treat conditions such as allergies, skin conditions and menstrual problems, rather than more

serious conditions. They can be used as a preventative measure, such as Echinacea to ward off colds and flu. Consumers may turn to complementary therapies for longstanding conditions that have not been successfully treated through conventional medicine.

See the Department of Health's website (see *Useful contacts*) for its guide if considering seeking treatment from a complementary therapist. The guide focuses on important issues that consumers should consider, like consulting your doctor and what the therapist should and should not advise. It provides sound general advice but does not focus on specific therapies. Special considerations can

arise in each case, as discussed here in the case of herbalism.

Chinese and western

Herbal medicine is in essence one complementary therapy: all traditions are based on the use of plants to heal. However, in a similar way as different food cultures use different herbs and spices, herbalists from different traditions will make use of different plants. These will reflect the herbs that are traditionally grown in the region in question. Each herbal tradition uses herbs to heal in a different way. In western herbalism herbs are used for their individual properties, such as Echinacea to stimulate the immune

AT A GLANCE

Remedies.

Qualifications.

Self regulation.

HERBAL REMEDIES: GENERAL PRECAUTIONS

When any medicine is taken along with other medications, herbal or otherwise, this can create the need for some extra precautions: the combination may reduce or enhance the effects of the medicines, or they may even interact with each other. Consider the following if taking over-the-counter herbal remedies:

- If you are already taking prescription medication, or have any pre-existing medical conditions, check with your doctor before taking herbal remedies.
- Do not take with medication that has a similar action as the herb – this can increase the potency of the medicine's effect.
- Do not take long term or for more than three months at a time. If considering taking the remedy long term consult a medical practitioner – such as your GP or a herbalist.
- If attempting to treat an ailment yourself with an over-the-counter herbal remedy and symptoms persist – consult your doctor.
- If pregnant or breastfeeding, do not use herbal remedies unless advised by a healthcare professional.

system and Devil's Claw as an anti-inflammatory (see *Common over-the-counter remedies*). While there are differences in approach, similarities also exist.

Most herbalists will base diagnosis on observations in the patient's constitution whether choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic or melancholic. Chinese herbalism is primarily based around the concepts of yin and yang, which are quite foreign to western medical thinking. The herbs used will depend on the deficiencies or excesses the practitioner identifies in the patient. Common remedies used in the Chinese tradition include ginseng and ginger. There can also be cross over between the herbs used in each tradition. The western herbal tradition will make use of some herbs also used in Chinese herbalism.

Herbalist qualifications

Evaluating the different qualifications of complementary health therapists can be difficult. There are a number of distinct herbal practitioners who practice herbalism in Ireland.

Chinese herbalism is usually a three year course, after which graduates receive a licentiate in TCM (traditional Chinese medicine). Further post graduate training courses are also available. There are three types of western herbalist qualification: medical, master and naturopathic, with significant differences between the qualifications of each practitioner. The master herbalist trains for two years on a part-time basis and hold a licentiate in master herbalism. Naturopathic herbalist training is a three year diploma course which combines a number of Western, Chinese and

“Herbal medicines without restricted sale seem to be subject to more controls than complimentary therapists who can administer restricted herbal remedies.”

Ayurvedic (Indian) herbal traditions. These are self accredited courses meaning they are not monitored or approved by bodies that set education and training standards, such as the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

A generic set of standards for complimentary therapy training courses is being drafted by HETAC. Their concern is with standards for programmes of higher education and not professional competence. However, the application of these standards to training courses for complimentary therapists would give the consumer a greater guarantee that set training standards have been achieved.

The medical herbalist trains to honours degree level (BSc). Some may also have post-graduate qualifications that focus on the clinical practice of herbalism. Internationally, medical herbalists are thought to be the most comprehensively trained western herbal practitioners.

The differences between qualifications

can be unclear to the consumer. This does not mean the therapist's qualification is not valid and worthy, but does make it difficult to measure what the qualification really means for the user of the service. Consumers entrust their health to complimentary therapists so it should be made clear the type and level of training held by practitioners who dispense health advice and herbal medicines.

Apart from the differences in herbalist qualifications, all complementary therapists remain unregulated in Ireland. The National Working Group on the Regulation of Complementary Therapists made recommendations in 2006 to strengthen the regulatory environment.

Voluntary self-regulation

The working group initially recommended statutory regulation for herbalists. But since the group made its recommendations, the Department of Health and Children have found that not only herbalists, but complementary therapists are generally a fragmented group. Each therapy will often have a number of representative organisations. The Department now supports “greater voluntary self-regulation in the first instance.” This process is now underway, such that ‘facilitated work days’ for a number of complimentary therapies, including herbal medicine, have taken place. These were a recommendation of the working group, with a view to encouraging federation into one representative organisation for the therapy. Two facilitated work days were held for associations representing herbal practitioners in 2007. It is hoped that further progress will be made on the harmonisation of training standards, but there is little evidence of this.

When the working group was established, five main representative organisations for herbal medicine were identified to work towards forming a herbal council and a herbalist register. These five herbalist organisations, who each operate their own register, have federated to establish the National Herbal Council and maintain a register of herbal practitioners. The website shows, in abbreviation, beside the name of each practitioner the organisation they are a member of (e.g. the Irish Register of Herbalists as IRH). Letters shown after the practitioner's name could mislead the consumer to assume

this represents a qualification, rather than indicate organisation membership. This system does not make it clear to the consumer the type of herbal practitioner and their level of qualification. The information on this site has been criticised by the Irish Institute of Medical Herbalists (IIMH), which is not a member.

Because there is no statutory regulation, there is no legal definition of a herbalist. In the absence of statutory regulation, the IIMH see accreditation of training standards as an important route for consumers to gain some assurance of standards.

Statutory regulation needed

Given the variations between herbal traditions, combined with the differences in western herbalist qualifications, the validity of a single national self-regulatory body for herbalism is questionable. This does not mean that regulation is not needed; it just means it is difficult, especially voluntary self-regulation. An independent statutory regulatory body does seem a better option. But as already highlighted, the department is pursuing voluntary self-regulation.

The Irish Medical Council regulates the medical profession in Ireland,

setting professional conduct standards, operating a registration scheme and assessing education standards. A similar body for complementary therapies could be required.

The debate so far looks at those who dispense herbal medicines. But the herbalist is not the only place consumers can gain access to herbal medicines. They are commonly available in health food stores and pharmacies. How are consumers protected? The consumer can buy some herbal medicines without question.

Herbal remedies

Herbal medicines are not regulated to the same degree as pharmacy medicines. Depending on the manufacturer, quality can vary, but the regulatory environment is changing (see *Regulation of over-the-counter herbs*).

The 'active' parts of the plant have medicinal properties. Depending on growing conditions, the level of the active parts can vary. Herbal products sold can be standardised to ensure that each product contains the same amount of the herb's active ingredient. But different products will contain a greater or lesser amount of the active ingredient. This determines the potency of the product.

Conventional medicines can also

contain elements derived from plants, often one isolated component of the plant. For example, morphine contains active ingredients derived from opium poppies and aspirin from the willow bark. Over-the-counter herbs, especially from the Chinese tradition, are often used for their individual properties rather than how they are traditionally used in Chinese herbalism. Ginseng is a common example, where it is commonly sold as an energy booster. This raises the question of the appropriateness of using some herbs in this manner.

The number of herbal medicines that can treat common ailments makes self-treatment an issue. Prevention of illness is a key principle of complementary medicine, which can also add a reliance on taking herbal medicines when we are not sick. Some ailments should not be self-treated. However, there are different levels of restriction on the sale of herbal medicines.

Restrictions on herbal remedies

Some conventional medicines are restricted to sale by prescription only, while others can be bought over-the-counter. In a similar way, some herbal remedies are only available on prescription from a medical practitioner with the powers to prescribe, such as a

COMMON OVER-THE-COUNTER HERBAL REMEDIES		
Remedy	Use and Actions	Precautions
Aesculus (or Horse Chestnut)	Improves the tone of veins, which can assist the treatment of piles and varicose veins.	Do not take with aspirin or anti-coagulants (e.g. warfarin).
Angus castus	Balances hormones. Especially stimulates the release of progesterone. Can be useful in treating pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) and teenage acne.	Do not take if on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) or hormonal contraceptives.
Black Cohosh	Balances female hormones. Can be useful in treating symptoms of menopause such as hot flushes.	Do not take if on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) or hormonal contraceptives.
Devil's Claw	Has anti-inflammatory properties. Can be used to treat joint pains and arthritis.	None known.
Echinacea	Balances the immune system, can help prevent colds and flu.	Do not take with immunosuppressant medication. Seek medical advice if suffering from leukaemia or HIV.
Ginseng (Siberian)	Balances the central nervous system, can help alleviate fatigue and stress. It is an 'adaptogen', a substance that helps the body adapt to changes such as stress.	Not advised for diabetics, or those with epilepsy or schizophrenia. Should not be taken with oral contraceptives or HRT. Best not taken with other stimulants, such as coffee.
Milk thistle	Protects the liver.	Seek medical advice if acute or chronic liver conditions are present.
Sage	Helps with menopausal hot flushes, as it can regulate sweating.	Not advised for those with epilepsy. Should not be taken with hormonal contraceptives or Tamoxifen.
Saw Palmetto	Prevents the production of inflammatory hormones that can lead to an enlarged prostate gland.	Seek medical advice with such symptoms. If already taking medication for an enlarged prostate, consult your doctor.
Uva-ursi	Has antiseptic properties in the urinary system. Can help treat cystitis and urinary tract infections	Seek medical attention if symptoms are prolonged or if there is any blood present in urine.
Valerian	Has a tranquilising action and acts on the nervous system. Can aid sleep.	Should not be taken with tranquilisers. May impair ability to drive or use machines.

Adapted from the A. Vogel Institute website www.herbsforhealthyliving.co.uk

medical doctor, while others are available over-the-counter, mostly in pharmacies and health food stores. Herbal medicines that the herbalist uses are of 'practitioner grade' and more potent than most over-the-counter herbal products. The herbalist can mix herbs so the herbal medicine is designed for the needs of the patient. They can also dispense remedies that are restricted from over-the-counter sale.

One might assume that restrictions are put in place because remedies are unsafe. They are not inherently unsafe, but rather the fact is that some herbal remedies can give rise to unwanted effects when taken in combination with other medicines. Restrictions can be based on safety, but also on the nature of the health problem the remedy can potentially treat, and whether such a problem should be treated by the patient themselves.

Combinations of certain medicinal products, whether herbal or conventional, can have interactions. See our table for an outline of some common remedies and the possible interactions that can occur. The increasing use of herbal products and medicinal products in general raise the issue of a need for greater regulation, especially in light of potential interactions. This is on the cards in the EU with the introduction of the Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive. Many herbal products are currently licensed as medicines, but this directive aims to harmonise herbal medicine licensing across the EU.

Regulation of over-the-counter herbs

The 2005 EU Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive introduced a new framework for placing medicinal herbal products on the EU market. Medicinal herbal products of appropriate quality and

safety may be placed on the market based on their history of traditional use. The herb must have a history of use for at least 30 years, 15 of which must be based on use in the EU. Effectiveness of the herb for the symptom or ailment it treats is also based on the history of safe use. The directive will not affect the availability of herbal medicine to practitioners, but applies to products that are intended for use without the intervention of a medical practitioner i.e. those remedies that are available over-the-counter. The purpose and composition of the product should mean there is no need for a medical practitioner to monitor treatment. The products used should only treat minor conditions, for example coughs, colds and digestive upset.

The European Medicines Agency Committee on Herbal Medicines Products was established to develop a list of permitted traditional herbal substances to facilitate a simplified approval procedure. Each substance is subject to scientific evaluation. The list will also indicate the allowed strength, dose, method of administration and specific safety information relating to each substance permitted. The list is currently being developed.

Product registration

The Irish Medicines Board (IMB, see *Useful contacts*) is a statutory body which aims to protect public health through the regulation of medicines. They also regulate medicinal herbal products on the Irish market. On the basis of the above directive, the IMB established the Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Registration Scheme in 2007. Each traditional herbal product sold in Ireland must be registered on this scheme. A transition period is allowed before all products must meet its requirements: any medicinal herbal product that was on

the market before the directive was transposed into Irish law can remain until 2011. But by 2011, no medicinal product can be placed on the market without authorisation or a certificate of traditional-use registration. Applications must be made by 2010. Manufacturers of herbal products have stated that this is a tight deadline, given the cost and technical detail required to make an application.

The IMB has suggested this scheme will provide the consumer with the assurance that when they buy herbal medicinal products they are: labelled appropriately, produced to an appropriate quality standard and safe under the proposed conditions of use. The IMB currently operates an online reporting system if patients suspect they have had an adverse reaction to a medicine (see *Useful contacts*). The registration system for herbal products will also facilitate the IMB to monitor suspected adverse reactions to herbal medicinal products.

Resistance

The directive is not likely to affect the availability of traditional herbal medicinal products, provided they meet its requirements.

The Irish Health Trade Association has stated that it will be difficult for products containing a combination of herbs to meet the directive's requirements.

Lobby groups who oppose the changes have suggested that herbal medicines are often manufactured by relatively small companies and the costs of preparing the required information to register a product will be too high for the industry as the directive brings medicinal herbal products into the same regulatory environment as pharmaceutical medicines. This then may lead to changes as to where herbal medicinal products are manufactured. We may see more pharmaceutical companies moving to produce these products.

Opponents also suggest that limiting herbal products to those that treat minor disorders could limit the range of herbal products currently on sale, thereby removing individual consumers' control of their own health outside of consulting a medical practitioner. This could also drive them to use conventional medicinal products available over-the-counter.

Useful contacts

Department of Health and Children

Guide to complementary therapists available at: http://www.dohc.ie/publications/complementary_therapists.html

Irish Medicines Board

www.imb.ie

European Medicines Agency

www.emea.europa.eu

Irish Health Trade Association

www.ihta.org

Report by Aisling Murtagh

choice comment

As consumers increasingly look to complementary sources for solutions to health problems, regulation of complementary medicine becomes a greater issue. Some consumers may prefer to choose alternative remedies for common ailments, such as Echinacea to treat a cold, rather than conventional cold remedies. It is difficult to balance adequate consumer protection with providing the consumer with the means to take the right amount of control over their health. The environment where consumers make these choices will determine if consumers can make safe choices. Herbal medicines without restricted sale seem to be subject to more controls than complimentary therapists who can administer restricted herbal remedies. There can be no clearer indication of the need for debate and progressive change in this sector. In fact, its urgency cannot and should not be underestimated.

Dealing with junk mail

Fed up with the masses of junk mail that clutters your doormat, your email inbox or even your fax machine? Not to mention those annoying cold callers? There are some steps you can take to help stop it, as we explain.

Unless you live a hermit-like existence (preferably based deep in the countryside or one of the smaller islands that dot the West coast), it's hard to escape the attentions of those who engage in unsolicited direct marketing.

Whether it's through email SPAM, promotional leaflets stuffed into your letterbox, or cold callers interrupting your dinner, direct marketers show no signs of backing off, despite the many complaints about the sector from consumers who strongly resent being targeted in this way.

It would be unfair, however, to label all types of unsolicited direct marketing as unnecessarily intrusive or even unwanted. There are some types of direct marketing that are considered acceptable, as long as the marketer follows a few basic steps and adheres to recommended industry codes of practice, such as those set by the Irish Direct Marketing Association (IDMA). This includes the 'opt-in' principle (see *Opt-in*

or *opt-out?*).

There are also an increasing number of data protection obligations that direct marketers are now subject to, particularly in relation to telecommunications (i.e. telephone & fax) and electronic communications (i.e. email and SMS). Yet there remain a significant minority of unscrupulous direct marketers who flout the rules on a regular basis.

What are direct marketers not allowed to do and how can you avoid being targeted by them?

1: Email

The data protection law states that no one can send individuals an email of any kind for the purpose of direct marketing without getting permission - or explicit consent - from you first within the last 12 months.

The exception to this is if the email is from a business with which you have engaged in a transaction within the last

12 months. In this case, some further rules still apply.

When you engaged in the transaction with the business, they should have informed you at the time why they were collecting your personal details and who else they would be disclosed to.

The direct marketing they are sending should be for similar products and services to that which they sold you previously.

You should have been given the option to refuse the use of your contact details for direct marketing purposes - not just at the time your details were initially collected, but each time they sent any further communication to you.

If you fail to refuse the use of your contact details using the options given to you by the direct marketer, then you will be deemed to have 'opted in' to the receipt of such email for a 12 month period from your most recent email communication.

Marketers cannot send you email for

AT A GLANCE

- Post and email.
- Phone nuisance.
- How to complain.

direct marketing purposes if:

- You have not given your prior consent to getting such mail within the last 12 months.
- The identity or the contact details of the sender is not revealed, or a valid address not provided for you to send an opt-out request.
- You already are a member of a club to which you pay a subscription for text, multimedia or email messages, unless the direct marketing is related to a similar product or service to the club.

Useful contacts

Office of the Data Protection Commissioner

Canal House
Station Road
Portllington
Co. Laois
1890 25 22 31
tel 057 868 4800
fax 057 868 4757
email
info@dataprotection.ie
www.dataprotection.ie

ComReg

Irish Life Centre
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Tel 1890 229 668
Fax (01) 804 9680
email
consumerline@comreg.ie
www.askcomreg.ie

Report by
John Cradden 

2: Telephone & fax

All telephone users can avail of a service that allows you to sign up to a register to opt-out of direct marketing, and thereby prevent cold calls to their telephone numbers.

The register, which was established in 2005 by ComReg and the Data Protection Commissioner, allows consumers who contact its telephone line operator to record a preference to opt-out of direct marketing in the National Directory Database (NDD).

The National Directory Database lists all phone numbers printed in public telephone directories or available through directory enquiries. It also records whether the subscriber has expressed a preference not to receive marketing calls. This facility is open to both residential and business phone subscribers and is a free service.

It applies to voice calls for residential subscribers and to both faxes and voice calls for business subscribers. All ex-directory numbers are automatically placed on the opt-out register. Bear in mind that it takes 28 days for an opt-out preference to be recorded in the NDD.

In the case of mobile telephone numbers, the mobile companies have arranged for all mobile customers to be regarded as not wanting to receive cold calls, so your mobile number is automatically barred from unsolicited direct marketing calls.

“A lot of direct marketing... represents an incredible waste of business resources and a considerable irritation to consumers”

A marketing fax cannot be sent to an individual (as opposed to a business) without prior consent. This rule does not apply if you work from home and use the fax in that context. In this situation, you can tell the sender that you do not wish to receive any such marketing faxes, which they are obliged to respect, or join the opt-out register of the NDD.

3: Post

For any mail that comes through your letterbox to be considered as direct marketing, it must be addressed to a named person and must be promoting a

product or service. However, many direct marketers try to get around laws of personal data and data protection legislation by simply addressing mail to ‘the occupant’, ‘the resident’ or ‘the householder’. There is little you can do to stop this, other than writing to the sender and demanding that they stop posting mail of this kind.

If direct marketing mail is personally addressed to you, you have the right to notify the sender, saying that you object to receiving such material. If the organisation fails to respect your stated wishes, they are breaking the law (see *How to make a complaint*).

Direct marketers who did not obtain your personal details directly from you are obliged to tell you of the original source of your details. This way, you can contact the original organisation and object to it using or passing on your details for marketing purposes.

If your name is in the telephone directory or the electoral register, it is regarded as being in the public domain. So if you are listed in the Electoral Register, you also have the right to object to your details being used for marketing purposes in the same way as you can register with the NDD to say that you don’t want your telephone number used for cold calling.

The Irish Direct Marketing Association also runs a ‘mail preference service’ whereby you can supply your details, and it will circulate them among its members instructing them not to contact you for direct marketing purposes.

4: Premium rate services

For further information on premium rate services, check out our recent article on premium rate numbers in the October 2007 edition of *Consumer Choice*, p368.

HOW TO MAKE A COMPLAINT

A complaint about unsolicited direct marketing can be made to the Data Protection Commissioner (see *Useful Contacts*). When making a complaint, you should provide as much information as possible, including your own contact details, the time and date of the message, a copy of the message if possible, and any previous dealings with the sender as well as a statement that you are making a formal complaint.

choice comment

A lot of direct marketing, whether it’s through post, email or telephone/fax, represents an incredible waste of business resources and a considerable irritation to consumers. It is simply good practice to have a system whereby consumers can be offered the opportunity to ‘opt-in’ to certain kinds of direct marketing for products and services that specifically interest them. Continuing to persist with an opt-out system and culture simply gives the industry a bad name. We are amazed that the Government considers the opt-out system to be acceptable in this day and age.

OPT-IN OR OPT-OUT?

Some consumers have reasonably asked why they need to ‘opt-out’ of being contacted by direct marketers. Why not have a system whereby people can ‘opt-in’ instead? In other words, individuals are given the opportunity to indicate that they would like to receive direct marketing material.

In the case of the NDD, the EU directive that gave rise to the database left it to member states to decide whether to have an opt-in or an opt-out register. When transposing this into national law, the

Department of Communications, after engaging in a consultation process, decided to adopt an opt-out standard.

The Data Protection Commissioner, in its guidance notes to direct marketers, says that as long as they provide a clear opt-out option to consumers when sending direct marketing by email, it is prepared to accept that the individual has given their ‘passive consent’ by not ticking the box. However, it recommends the use of the opt-in boxes as a matter of good practice.



Pharmacy advice

The pharmacist has an important role to play in healthcare, but are consumers over-reliant on their pharmacist as a source of advice and expertise on health issues?

The pharmacist is an easily accessible healthcare professional and the pharmacy is one healthcare outlet we are now well supplied with in Ireland. Research carried out in 2007 for the Irish Pharmaceutical Union (IPU, see *Useful websites*) found that Irish people have greater access to pharmacies than other Europeans. The number of pharmacies in the Irish market is reaching saturation point. In addition, we use this resource quite a lot: 74% of people surveyed visited a pharmacy at least once a month and 68% asked the pharmacist for advice.

The pharmacist's role in healthcare centres around dispensing medicines and offering advice on their correct use. The pharmacist is an expert in medicines and their role in treating health problems. When medicines are used to address health problems, it is usually as a

treatment, rather than a preventative measure. This makes an over-reliance on medicines not the most ideal approach to health. The old saying rings true: 'prevention is better than cure'.

No pill for all ills

In 2007, the Sub-Committee of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children produced a report on the adverse effects of pharmaceuticals. This group was set up in response to concerns that the role of pharmaceuticals in health services is excessive, and that there is an increasing trend in Ireland of a 'pill for every ill'. While it is vital to recognise the important role of the pharmacist in healthcare, this must come with some cautionary advice that helps us to move away from an over-reliance on medicines. Also, some over-the-counter (otc)

medicines, such as antacids and cold remedies, are advertised on TV. This information can skew the consumer's attitude to medicines.

The limits of pharmacy advice

Pharmacists can give advice on minor ailments and suggest if a medicine is appropriate. They can advise the consumer to visit the doctor, when they feel the ailment cannot be treated in the pharmacy setting.

The advice that a pharmacist can provide also depends on information the consumer gives the pharmacist. The amount of time available will affect the quality of advice and the amount of information the pharmacist can gather about you. The pharmacy technician can make up prescriptions under the supervision of the pharmacist. Such

AT A GLANCE

Regulation.

2007 Pharmacy Bill.

Prevention.

PHARMACY REGULATOR

In 2007, the regulation of the pharmacy profession was modernised with the introduction of the Pharmacy Act. This included enabling the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI, see *Useful contacts*) as the regulator of pharmacy in Ireland. As the regulator, the PSI's responsibilities include:

- Maintaining a register of pharmacists. A full register of pharmacists and pharmacies must be published annually and made available online.
- Annual review of registered pharmacists and pharmacies subject to fitness to practice and fitness to

operate guidelines.

- Developing a new code of professional conduct, including ethical principles, for pharmacists and pharmacies.
- Investigating complaints.

The changes make the pharmacist more accountable for their professional conduct with the introduction of a complaints procedure and fitness to practise requirements. Previously, compliance with fitness to practice and operate requirements were not offences. They now are and if the pharmacist does not comply they can be taken off the register.

assistance means better use is made of the professional skill of the pharmacist and the pharmacist has greater contact with the consumer.

Having said all that, consumers must remain vigilant and should not accept pharmacy advice without question.

Medicines interact

Some medicines can have negative side effects when taken in combination with others. Even vitamins, minerals and natural remedies can interact with how a medicine functions in the body.

All medicines can have side effects, regardless of whether they are prescribed, etc. or a herbal remedy. Since November 2007, consumers can report adverse reactions to the Irish Medicines Board via its website (see *Useful websites*). Prior to this, only healthcare professionals could report adverse reactions.

IPU research found that consumers often visit the same pharmacy for their prescriptions (90%), but were less likely to do so for non-prescription medicines (64%). Visiting the same pharmacist for your prescription means they have a record of medicines previously prescribed to you. However, when buying over-the-counter medicines, you may not have direct contact with the pharmacist. You might not even buy them at a pharmacy.

The consumer should exercise some general precautions when taking all medicines. Tell the pharmacist if you are:

- Taking any other medications, prescribed or otherwise.
- Pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Have any allergies to medicines.
- Have any medical conditions.

If you have unused or unwanted medicines at home, you can return these to the pharmacy for safe disposal.

“The CAI would like to see pharmacists being given the power to substitute generic equivalents for brand specific medicines.”

Read the label

Research carried out for the IPU in 2005 found that people often don't read the leaflet with non-prescription medicines. Of the people who were taking prescription medicine, one in three did not check if it was appropriate to take the it with non-prescription medicines.

Even without getting advice from the pharmacist, information on the cautionary use of medicines can be gained from simply reading the medicine's packaging and information leaflet. Medical language can be hard to understand as technical terms are often used. If unsure of what something means, ask.

Don't be embarrassed

IPU research also found that 25% of adults are embarrassed to discuss the following conditions with a pharmacist (or anyone else): incontinence, thrush, sexual health problems, body odour, and irritable bowel syndrome. Illness should not be a source of embarrassment; your health is worth much more than this. The pharmacy can act as a useful starting point for advice on such conditions.

Under the code of professional conduct for pharmacists, anything you discuss with them must remain confidential.

Value your health, evaluate your ailments

Some ailments, such as a cold or hayfever, are minor and don't always need a doctor's attention. The pharmacy can provide medicines that help with the ailment, but not all health problems for which over the counter treatments are available are the same. If a consumer seeks relief from a cold, the pharmacy can provide a wealth of symptom-relieving products. But if the problem is a recurring one, such as constipation, medical products that alleviate symptoms should not be relied upon in the long term. Even though some ailments are minor, if they are an ongoing problem, their implications for health can need more attention.

We must always exercise caution when it comes to our health. Some medicines are not a cure, but help to alleviate symptoms. If other medical conditions are present, the minor ailment could be related to this, so it's not always wise to judge these symptoms as minor. If your symptoms are severe, then the doctor will be the best healthcare professional from which to seek advice.

More regulation or deregulation?

Does our attitude to medicines make a case for greater control of medicines? Balancing available medicine with patient attitude to health and medicines is difficult. Some consumers have a responsible attitude, some are unconcerned, while others may misuse medicines.

Some otc medicines hold the potential for misuse. For example, some cold remedies contain substances, such as pseudoephedrine and ephedrine that can be extracted and used to make crystal meth, a class A drug. Last year in the UK it was discussed whether cold remedies should become prescription only. This would remove the consumer's ability to treat colds through the pharmacy and increase the need to go to the doctor. In the end, pack size restrictions were put in place.

Reducing restrictions on the availability of the morning after pill is an ongoing debate. In the UK, the morning after pill is available without prescription following consultation with a pharmacist. The IPU supports

Useful contacts

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email
info@pharmaceutical society.ie
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Health Service Executive
Infoline 1850 241 850
email info@hse.ie
www.hse.ie

Useful websites

Irish Pharmaceutical Union
www.ipu.ie

Irish Medicines Board
www.imb.ie

Report by
Aisling Murtagh 

deregulation and suggests if regulation changes it should be sold under the same protocol in Ireland.

Since 2001, painkillers containing paracetamol sold outside the pharmacy cannot be sold in packets containing over 12 tablets and only one pack can be sold at a time. For sale in the pharmacy, packs of 24 can be sold, but again, only one at a time. There have been calls for more control of non-prescription painkillers as some contain substances, such as codeine, that can lead to dependency when misused.

It is difficult to achieve a middle ground on this issue to afford an adequate level of consumer protection, while also allowing consumers access to medicines so they can take greater control over their health.

More power to you

When your doctor prescribes a specific brand of medicine, the pharmacist is not permitted to substitute the branded medicine for a generic equivalent. The doctor will usually prescribe under a brand name; the pharmacist must provide this brand. IPU research found that 59% of people surveyed were in favour of changing this system. Generic medicines are often cheaper than their branded equivalents and of equal quality.

The pharmacist may question why a medicine has been prescribed by the doctor for a particular use. This helps protect against prescription error, a significant problem that has been highlighted. The pharmacist will review each prescription in terms of dosage, potential side effects or interactions, before they dispense the prescribed medicine(s). But when the medicine is supplied, there is no monitoring of the medicines consumers take. Medication reviews are carried out in the UK, where the patient meets a pharmacist, doctor or nurse and all the medication they take is re-assessed. The 2007 report on the adverse effects of pharmaceuticals from the Sub-Committee of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children recommended that: "the role of the pharmacist in community health should be expanded and provision made for regular medication reviews for all patients."

The HSE is currently reviewing the services provided by, and the professional role of, the community pharmacy. The introduction of medicine reviews would be a welcome additional service.

A wider role for the pharmacy

The pharmacy plays an increasing role in healthcare, apart from providing medicines. It can provide health screening services, such as blood pressure monitoring, blood glucose and cholesterol screening. The pharmacy can be a mediator to other health services, but the pharmacist cannot diagnose, they can only monitor and screen. For example, if a cholesterol screening indicates you have high cholesterol, this can then signal you should see your doctor to begin managing the problem.

Health promotion campaigns have run in cooperation between the IPU and various bodies, such as the Irish Cancer Society campaign to stop smoking and the Irish Heart Foundation to promote blood pressure awareness. The pharmacist is a health professional, but the pharmacy is also a retail outlet. Are there some potential conflicts in obtaining health advice in a commercial environment?

If health promotion is linked with a self-medication approach, which is possible if it occurs in a pharmacy setting, then there is a risk that this could increase our 'pill for all ills' attitude, rather than taking preventative measures, such as diet and lifestyle changes, in our approach to health.

Professional conduct

The concept of 'pharmaceutical care' means the responsible provision of medicines to achieve definitive outcomes that improve a patient's quality of life. Are there contradictions within the concept of pharmaceutical care, the health professional and commercial role of the pharmacist?

Pharmacists operate by a code of professional conduct. With the introduction of the 2007 Pharmacy Act, a revised code of professional conduct is being drawn up (see *Pharmacy regulator*). The key principle underpinning the draft

code of professional conduct is personal responsibility, where the pharmacist must accept responsibility for their actions and the professional services they provide. Their primary concern should be the health and welfare of the patient. This should afford a greater level of consumer protection and reduce the conflict of interest that can be a cause of concern.

The 2007 Pharmacy Act also prohibits a registered medical practitioner from having a beneficial interest in a pharmacy business, such as part or full ownership. The rule also goes the other way. Pharmacists and pharmacy companies cannot have a beneficial interest in a medical practitioner's premises.

Over-reliant?

Consumers use the pharmacy as a source of healthcare advice. They may seek advice from the pharmacy because of the cost of visiting the GP and the convenience of attending the pharmacy. IPU research found that 59% of consumers rely on pharmacists' advice to solve their health problems. 95% of these people value and trust the advice they receive from the pharmacist.

Pharmacy dispute

In March 2008, the HSE reduced the percentage added to wholesale medicines from 18% to 8%, which they say should result in cheaper prices for the consumer. The percentage is in line with other European countries where the wholesale margin is around 8%. The HSE have stated that wholesalers can pass on part of the mark up to pharmacies by way of discounts. Pharmacists are not happy with the change. The IPU believes that cuts in payment will damage services and have a negative impact on patient care. It does not see the cuts as an effective way of tackling the growing cost of medicines.

choice comment

The pharmacy is not always the best place to seek advice on health issues. However, it can be a very useful first step. Depending on the problem, it may be the only needed step. But at the end of the day, the pharmacist will advise on medicines. They can aim to cure illness, but many medicines just relieve symptoms. Medical products will state that they should not be relied upon long term and the consumer should heed this advice. Consumer reliance on pharmacy advice is not something we can blame on the pharmacy, but rather a lack of accessible and affordable advice from other sources. Healthy living is crucial for the prevention of illness. This should be a paramount goal, rather than relying on medicines when we all too often become ill. The CAI would like to see pharmacists being given the power to substitute generic equivalents for brand specific medicines. Consumers are entitled to choice, especially in this high cost environment.

Tea

We have long been a great nation of tea drinkers. This tradition is still with us. Tea has its place at every occasion. A 2001 survey of food consumption in Ireland found that 91% of Irish consumers drink tea.

In George Orwell's essay 'A nice cup of tea' he suggests we should choose between Indian or Ceylon tea. In the modern Irish context, brand has overtaken origin with those in southern parts being avid Barry's drinkers and Lyons holding greater popularity in other parts. But regular black tea is not the only tea that graces our shop shelves. The array of tea now available is almost reminiscent of the colours of the rainbow, from green to red. Some of us are becoming more adventurous tea drinkers - see our guide to some herbal infusions. It may seem like an obvious question, as the Irish are long seasoned tea drinkers, but how should we make the best cup? There are a surprising number of factors to consider. However, at the end of the day, a good cup of tea is an individual preference.

boiling water will cause it to lose more oxygen, which can help to extract flavour from tea. Green and white teas are more delicate and immersing these in boiling water affects their flavour, leaving them bitter tasting. Brew these in water that has recently boiled, but is not boiling. There's no need to get a thermometer out, but some suggest brewing at 75°C. Herbal teas are generally best brewed in boiling water to extract the plant's beneficial substances.

Brew

Infuse for 3-5 minutes. A lengthier brew will produce a stronger cup. Green and white tea takes less time to infuse. Most of tea's antioxidants are thought to be extracted in the first minute of brewing. Infuse for at least this length. Longer will extract more caffeine and a shorter time can make for a more relaxing, evening-time brew.

Pot or cup?

Real traditionalists say a pot is best, made from ceramic or earthenware and warmed before use. 'Scalding' the teapot with boiling water helps warm the pot and keep it free of any bacteria lurking within. A warm teapot will help tea stay hot for longer. Stir the tea when you pour on the water and just before serving.

Loose or bag?

The plants we use to make tea are dried. When we add water the plant is re-hydrated so it needs space to expand to its former glory. Tea bags can leave little room for the tea inside to increase in size. Tea balls can also be a little tight. Pyramid teabags may not be a gimmick after all.

If using loose tea, a general rule is one teaspoon per cup. But an Irish tradition, corresponding with our generous nature is: 'one for each person, and one for the pot'.

AT A GLANCE

Herbal infusions.

Health benefits.

Brewing tea.

Water temperature

For black tea, use boiling water that is freshly boiled. Boil only once – re-

HERBAL INFUSIONS

Each herbal tea has distinct properties. Strictly speaking they are not tea, but a tisane or infusion. Tea has become a generic name for all teas, but tea is the plant, not the process. Most herbal teas are caffeine free and taken without milk. It is useful to check the ingredients of herbal teas, some may have added flavourings or sweeteners. All brands and types are not the same. Like fruit juices, fruit teas can be acidic, and can damage tooth enamel.

- **Chai** Native to India, chai tea is a blend of different spices. The tea can be brewed with water or milk. The 'chai latte' has even hit the menus of many coffee shops.
- **Chamomile** The flowers of the plant are used to make this tea. It is relaxing and thought to help soothe the digestive tract.
- **Peppermint** This tea aids digestion. It is a variety of mint, as is spearmint. These both have similar properties.
- **Ginger** Dried ginger root is used in this

tea. Slices of the fresh root can make a fresh ginger brew. Ginger is a warming tea, it improves circulation and aids digestion.

- **Lemon Balm** With a refreshing lemon taste, lemon balm has similar properties to chamomile, a relaxing tea that can aid a restful night's sleep.
- **Mate** Native to South America, mate can be considered a substitute for coffee, as it contains caffeine and has a 'pick me up' effect.
- **Nettle** When brewed, this tea can be quite green, but apparently if you add lemon it will turn pink! Nettles are thought to have detoxifying properties.
- **Rooibos** Also known as red tea, rooibos is native to South Africa. When brewed it looks quite similar to regular tea. This tea can be taken with or without milk.
- **Rosehip** The dried pods of the rosehip plant are used in this tea. It has a distinct red colour and fruity taste, is high in antioxidants, and is a source of vitamin C.

When tea is processed it is graded by size, which ranges from whole to broken leaves, fannings (size of a pinhead) and dust. Whole leaves don't make good tea as they don't easily release the flavour. Orange pekoe (OP) is the term used to grade black tea, and does not refer to flavour or variety. Grading information is usually not found on tea boxes, so it's not clear what grade(s) of tea have been used. But the grade of tea used is not thought to affect quality or taste. Finding small particles at the bottom of your cup could be some indication.

The tea plant

Black, green, white and oolong tea all come from the same plant, *Camellia Sinensis*. Their differences come from how the plant is processed, which affects the flavour and colour of tea. Black tea is oxidised (a reaction involving oxygen), causing the green leaf to turn black. Green tea is not oxidised, so it retains its colour. Oolong is semi-oxidised. White tea comes from the young bud of the tea plant and is not oxidised.

All tea contains antioxidants, but the level of oxidation affects the amount tea contains. White tea is thought to contain the most, with green coming in second, then oolong and finally black. The level of caffeine also follows the same pattern.

There are many varieties of tea, such as Assam, Ceylon and Darjeeling. They

"It may seem like an obvious question, as the Irish are long seasoned tea drinkers, but how should we make the best cup?"

come from different regions and are grown under varying conditions. Ceylon is traditionally grown in Sri Lanka. Assam and Darjeeling tea originate in India. Branded teas can be a blend of different varieties.

Milk and sugar?

Most of us Irish take milk in our tea – but should we add the milk before or

after pouring? Either way, it's not thought to affect taste, which will depend on how much milk you add. In the past, milk was often added before pouring to prevent fine china cups from cracking – but the mugs we use today are more robust. If making a cuppa with loose tea, without a strainer, adding the milk first can prevent the leaves from rising to the top. Research has suggested that adding any milk at all can affect the antioxidant content, but other research has contradicted this. If you add lemon and sugar, add the sugar first as apparently the citric acid in the lemon will prevent the sugar from dissolving.

Tea and health

Tea is a source of antioxidants that can slow down the process of cell degeneration (see 'Antioxidants', *Consumer Choice*, December 2007, p478). Last year, the UK Tea Council launched a campaign suggesting four cups of tea per day is good for health. The UK Advertising Standards Authority received complaints about this suggestion and investigated the claim. They concluded that evidence relating to the benefits of tea was not conclusive enough to validate the claim. It's not that tea is not good for you, but aiming to drink four cups every day may not be the best advice.

Tea can affect iron absorption, so it's best to wait for at least half an hour after a meal before having a cup. It has a greater effect on iron from plant sources (non-haem) than from meat (haem iron).

A cup of tea contains about half the caffeine of a coffee. Tea also contains the amino acid, theanine. Research carried out for Lyons tea has found that this substance can contribute to a "relaxed yet alert state of mind". Caffeine in coffee can make us jittery, and the theanine in tea is thought to be the reason why tea does not have the same effect.

Tea is a diuretic: it promotes water loss from the body. It can still contribute to our daily fluid intake, but we should not rely on it - pure water is best.

Useful contact

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choice comment

It's probably unfair to say tea is either really good or bad for you. It really all depends on how much of it you drink and what else you eat. Tea can contribute to our daily intake of antioxidants, but is no substitute for our required intake of fruit and vegetables. With so many of us being tea drinkers, we obviously enjoy the stuff. This fact alone has to bring some benefits to our health and wellbeing.

Report by
Aisling Murtagh 



Organic food

It is almost an accepted fact that organic food is more expensive than conventionally produced food. Is it worth the extra cost when the benefits are taken into account? Or can consumers get a fairer deal, depending on where they buy organic produce?

The market for organic food is growing in Ireland. The Irish consumer spend on certified organic food was €66.4 million in 2006. This figure is expected to grow by 15-20% annually, according to the 2006 Bord Bia annual report. We take a look at some of the reasons why consumers choose organic food, and also the other side of the debate.

Basic principles

The organic production system avoids agrochemical inputs, such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. Building soil fertility is a key tenet of organic farming, where the soil is fed, rather than the plant. Crop rotation is important as plants use different nutrients from the soil. If one type of crop is continually grown this can deplete specific soil nutrients. Legumes, such as peas and beans, are an organic farmer's friend. When grown, they fix nitrogen into the soil, which many crops deplete. This all means that organic farming can be more environmentally

friendly as it protects wildlife and biodiversity, which the use of agrochemicals can harm. Organic farming standards have strict regard for standards of animal welfare with the health and well-being of the animal being paramount. EU regulation and production standards reflect these basic principles that organic food production is certified against.

Conventional farming

We must recognise that conventional farming can also operate using some of the basic principles used in organic production, such as having a high regard for animal welfare and using methods like crop rotation. The Rural Environmental Protection scheme (REPS) provides grant aid for farmers who farm according to criteria that support more environmentally friendly farming practice. It is estimated that 30% of Ireland's agricultural land is farmed under REPS. Organic farmers can also participate in REPS.

Food produced under the REPS scheme is not differentiated in the market based on the fact that environmental farming practices have been adhered to. This can mean that the good farming practice of conventional farmers is overlooked, and is somewhat invisible in the marketing of conventional food.

Organic farming gives a guarantee that certain criteria have been adhered to. Guarantees that certain standards exist are becoming more important to consumers. Bord Bia have developed a number of food quality assurance schemes. When its mark is applied, this assures the consumer that certain criteria have been observed in food production.

Production standards

Standards for organic produce sold in Europe are set out by EU regulations. Member states must abide by these regulations when developing national standards. Irish certified organic produce must adhere to the rules set out in

AT A GLANCE

Standards.

Certification.

Price.



PRICES OF ORGANIC AND NON-ORGANIC PRODUCE ¹

	Non-Organic Supermarket (€)	Organic Supermarket (€) ²	Organic Farmers' Market (€) ²
FRUIT			
Apples (per kg)	2.79	3.39 +22%	3.60 +29%
Avocado (each)	1.45	1.50 +3%	1.50 +3%
Bananas (per kg)	1.39	3.56 +156%	3.10 +123%
Lemons (each)	0.45	0.50 +11%	0.50 +11%
Oranges (per kg)	1.96	2.74 +39%	2.80 +43%
Pears (per kg)	2.47	2.99 +21%	3.65 +48%
VEGETABLES			
Broccoli (per kg)	4.32	7.98 +85%	4.60 +6%
Carrots (per kg)	1.59	1.78 +12%	2.00 +26%
Cauliflower (each)	1.49	2.49 +67%	3.00 +101%
Celery (each)	1.19	1.99 +67%	2.20 +85%
Onions (per kg)	1.78	3.21 +80%	2.60 +46%
Garlic (each)	0.52	0.50 -3%	0.60 +15%
Potatoes (per kg)	1.61	2.05 +27%	1.90 +18%
Tomatoes (cherry, per kg)	7.96	9.05 +14%	7.00 -12%
Leeks (per kg)	4.79	5.80 +21%	3.75 -22%
Cabbage (each)	1.72	1.94 +13%	1.75 +2%
Mushrooms (per kg)	4.79	8.06 +68%	7.25 +58%

Notes: ¹ Price survey carried out between 10th of March to 1 April 2008. The prices were collected at three supermarkets and a number of stalls at farmers' markets in Dublin, Cork and the midlands. ² Percentage differences are based on non-organic supermarket prices.

Ireland's standards document. Organic certification bodies will certify organic food against these defined standards (see *Organic certification*). Some may have additional voluntary regulations combined with the minimum requirements, such as the UK Soil Association's Ethical Trade certification that combines organic certification with ethical standards (see *Useful websites*).

Organic farmers must register with one organic certification body and practice farming according to set organic standards. If a farmer is changing from conventional to organic production, the farmer must adhere to organic standards for two years before the farm is given organic certification and produce can be sold as organic. The farm is also inspected at least once annually to ensure that standards are upheld.

Organic certification

Two certification bodies currently operate in Ireland, the Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA) and the Organic Trust (see *Useful websites*). Certification bodies must be approved by the Department of Agriculture and are given a certification code (IOFGA IRL-OIB2-EU, Organic Trust IRL-OIB3-EU).

Symbols on food labels will indicate to the consumer that a food has been produced according to organic standards.

Symbols are not legally required, but the label should at least display the words 'certified organic' or 'organic certification' and the certifying body's code. The two Irish organic certification bodies have their own symbol.

The consumer may identify other symbols on organic foods that also indicate the food has been produced to organic standards. Organic food sold in Ireland may not be produced or certified in Ireland. There are many other certification bodies in operation throughout the world. These include the Soil Association in the UK, Agriculture Biologique (AB) in France and Eco-Cert in Belgium. Demeter certifies biodynamic produce and operates worldwide (see *Biodynamic: a different perspective on organic*). The many symbols could potentially confuse consumers. Bio-Siegel is the only symbol permitted for use on organic produce in Germany.

Some countries do not use the term organic, but use 'bio' or 'eco' instead, which refers to the same processes and standards. Imports of organic produce from non-EU countries are only permitted when production standards conform with EU criteria.

Organic production is strictly regulated, so that when a symbol is applied regulators are there to ensure standards have been adhered to (see *Can*

consumers trust the label?).

Ireland's organic sector

The Bord Bia 2006 annual report highlights that the single greatest challenge for the Irish organic sector is to increase production and develop products that meet lifestyle demands. They note that few organic farmers can presently meet the consistency and volume requirements of supermarkets and larger processors. Bord Bia suggests the consequences of this are imports of organic produce and higher retail prices. In 2006, 0.9% of Ireland's agricultural land was certified organic. The government wishes to expand organic production and aims to increase this figure to 5% by 2012. It is hoped that larger producers will convert to organic production so that Ireland can meet market demand with fewer imports. This should also lead to a reduced purchase price for the consumer.

Organic food miles

The principles of organic farming should make it a more sustainable kind of farming. But the sustainability debate relating to organic food can be taken beyond the farm. Is organic food really organic if beyond the farm gate the underlying principle of a more sustainable system is not carried through? This

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Organic Unit

Department of Agriculture
and Food
Johnstown Castle Estate
Co Wexford
1890 200 509
organics@agriculture.gov.ie
www.agriculture.gov.ie

Food Safety Authority of Ireland

Abbey Court
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Advice Line
1890 336 677
tel (01) 817 1300
fax (01) 817 1301
email info@fsai.ie
www.fsai.ie

Useful websites

International Federation
of Organic Agricultural
Movements
www.ifoam.org

Irish Organic Farmers
and Growers
Association
www.iofga.org

The Organic Trust
www.organic-trust.org

Soil Association
www.soilassociation.org

Demeter
www.demeter.net

Report by
Aisling Murtagh 

CAN CONSUMERS TRUST THE LABEL?

Organic produce is not always cosmetically perfect. It can look a little more rugged than conventional produce. Pesticides are not used in organic production so you may have to accept finding a few holes in your cabbage where a caterpillar has feasted or taking home a few friends from the insect world who have taken up residence in your broccoli.

Although some may argue there are identifiable differences, organic and conventionally produced food cannot be distinguished just by looking at it. The differences are not clear cut and rogue traders can exploit this. Consumers must be assured they get what they pay for.

New regulation was introduced in 2007 that gives the Department of Agriculture stronger powers of enforcement. Fraudsters face a fine

of up to €5,000 and even the possibility of a prison sentence.

The Department of Agriculture's Organic Unit employs dedicated inspectors who inspect retail outlets where organic food is sold. If consumers suspect produce being sold as organic may not be, they can report this to the Organic Unit (see *Useful contacts*).

What if there's no label? If a shop sources and sells organic produce, such as fruit and vegetables, that are not pre-packed, the retail outlet must be registered with one of Ireland's organic certification bodies. If an organic certification symbol is not displayed on the product, the consumer can ask to see the certification certificate. Retailers who sell organic food without packaging are also subject to annual inspection, just like organic farmers.



particularly relates to imported organic produce and the distance it travels. The UK Soil Association has introduced a policy that organic produce can only be air freighted if it meets their Ethical Trade standard. This addresses the social aspects of sustainability, but air freighted organic produce is still dependent on air transport, a significant contributor to environmentally unfriendly greenhouse gases. However, the UK Soil Association suggests the extent of air freighted organic food is overstated; it calculates that this represents less than 1% of all imported organic food in the UK. Air freighted organic foods are mostly fruit and vegetables, to ensure a supply is available out of season. In addition, fruit and vegetables can be transported in the cargoes of passenger flights that will fly anyway.

Organic food products

Food that has undergone a degree of processing, from organic bread to an organic ready meal, must contain at least 95% certified organic ingredients. Some ingredients, such as salt, are not given organic certification. Salt is a mineral, not a plant and cannot be organically grown. This is why some leeway is allowed.

No artificial colours, flavours or preservatives are permitted for use in organic food. However, some additives are permitted, but come from natural sources. Of the 290 additives permitted for use in the EU, 35 are

allowed in organic food.

Better for you?

Organic food labels cannot claim that organic food has a better nutritional value than non-organic food. Research has suggested that organic food can have a higher nutritional content. But other research has also suggested it does not.

Recently it emerged that a four year study at the University of Newcastle found that food from organic production can have a higher nutritional content. However, this study is yet to be peer reviewed. In 2001, the UK Soil Association produced a report reviewing 400 scientific papers on the differences between organic and non-organic food and concluded that the scientific evidence supports the fact that organic food can be of higher nutritional value. Last year, the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) carried out a similar review and found that overall the scientific evidence does not support the notion that organic food is better nutritionally. BNF found some differences, such as higher vitamin C and lower nitrate levels in organic vegetables, but suggest this is not significant enough to have a great impact on human health.

Proponents within the organic sector would argue that research into the benefits of organic food is lacking. The BNF review does suggest that good quality research comparing the nutrient content of organic and non-organic foods is not widely conducted. The argument from the

organic lobby is that the conventional food industry has greater financial wealth to fund food research and that its research does not often focus on the benefits of organic food.

Leaving the nutritional debate aside, consumers of organic food often feel that by virtue of organic standards, organic food is better because it is 'GM free' and no pesticides, fertilizers etc. have been used in its production.

Why the price difference?

Organic farming can produce less food per acre of land because of its less intensive production practices. Labour costs are often higher than conventional production, as are animal feedstuffs. Weeding is thought to be the major additional labour cost as no herbicides are used.

Conventional farming can rely more greatly on purchased inputs, such as fertilizers, while organic production relies on natural inputs, such as farmyard manure and composting. But this does not balance the costs of production so that organic food matches conventional food prices.

Organic production is a more costly system of food production and this is then passed on to the consumer of organic food. Higher costs are justified for some consumers who are willing to pay a higher premium for certified organic produce. Bord Bia research indicates that consumers are prepared to pay 15 to 20% more for organic food,

ORGANIC PROS AND CONS

The points below are subject to debate and are presented as simplified statements. However, it is useful to illustrate both sides to show how a generalised benefit is neither simple nor clear-cut.

Benefits

- Potentially better taste and nutritional value.
- No synthetic pesticide or chemical use in production.
- No use of GM plant seed or animal feed.
- More environmentally beneficial farming – supports wildlife and biodiversity.
- No routine treatment of animals with medicines – less residues in food.
- Limited additives permitted in organic food.

Drawbacks

- Costs more to produce – higher prices for the consumer.
- Lower productivity system that requires more land to produce less food.
- Intensive organic farming is more exhaustive on land.
- Quality can deteriorate quicker than conventional produce that uses additives and preservatives.

but not above this. Our survey showed that the actual price difference can be much greater than this.

Some would also argue that conventionally produced food is too cheap and to get prices down, compromises can be made. This argument is very hard for low income consumers to accept.

Organic food is increasingly available from alternative food retailing outlets such as farmers' markets and box schemes. But only a small proportion of organic food is purchased from these outlets. The 2005 Bord Bia Organic Market Channel Study found that mainstream retail channels accounted for 85% of all retail sales of organic food. The total value of sales through independent channels was 15% (5% independent traders, 4% health food stores, 3% deli specialists and 2% through box schemes).

Our fruit and veg survey

Fruit and vegetables are often available in a number of varieties. Different varieties vary in price as some are easier to grow, others are more prolific. To try to balance things out, where possible, we looked at a number of varieties and calculated an average price for each fruit or vegetable. Our survey is of fresh produce and doesn't speak for other organic produce, such as meat, bread, eggs etc.

We compared the price of organic and conventional produce. In most cases, organic fruit and vegetables were more expensive than their non-organic equivalent. Organic cherry tomatoes and leeks at the farmers' market were cheaper than the conventional at the supermarket. But this should not be taken as a general rule of thumb, as there is a great level of variation in price from season to season.

We probably already know that organic produce is generally more expensive, but

it is also important to highlight by how much. Overall, organic fruit and vegetables were 23% more expensive at the farmers' market and 41% at the supermarket, than conventional produce.

When comparing organic with organic at the two outlets, our findings indicate that the farmers' market can provide a better deal. Supermarket prices can be lower, but the farmers market was generally cheaper to a greater degree. For example, broccoli was €3.38 cheaper per kilo at the farmers' market and leeks €2.05 (see *Prices of organic and non-organic produce*).

Box schemes

Organic box schemes will offer small, medium and large boxes filled with vegetables and/or fruit. The box will be delivered to your door. One drawback is that you will get a set range of vegetables.

But if you really don't like certain things, on request the supplier is often willing to substitute the item for another of equivalent value. The selection will vary depending on what's in season, so each delivery may also bring a few surprises. Suppliers will often guarantee a base of more staple vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, onions and garlic.

Organic box schemes are difficult to compare: what you receive and the exact amount can vary. We did a rough comparison. A mixed fruit and vegetable box can cost between €20 and €30, which will usually contain about 8 to 10 types of fruit and vegetables. We made up a quick basket from the supermarket containing non-organic onions (1kg), garlic (two bulbs), potatoes (1kg), carrots (1kg), broccoli (1 head), tomatoes (300g vine), bananas (1kg), apples (four), and oranges (four) and it cost €16.53.

There are other additional benefits to buying organic produce through alternative avenues. Produce bought through farmers markets' and box schemes is usually sold with minimal or no packaging. Organic fruit and vegetables sold at the supermarket are always sold packaged (usually in plastic, one of the most difficult materials to recycle) to differentiate them from conventional produce. Consumers will also find a greater range of organic fruit and vegetables available through farmers' markets and box schemes.

BIODYNAMIC: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANIC

Biodynamic farming is a type of organic production developed by Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the spiritual philosophy, anthroposophy. It is a specific method of organic farming that takes a more holistic approach and sees the farm and soil as a living organism. Maintaining and preserving soil health for generations is a central part of biodynamic farming. Methods adopted can differ from organic, such as using a planting calendar that guides sowing according to patterns of the moon and stars and the use of special organic herbal and mineral preparations to aid soil fertility.

choice comment

Organic food is more costly to produce so some higher prices seem inevitable. The benefits of organic food can be debated, but overall organic production has environmental benefits. The jury is still out regarding the nutritional content, and we doubt they'll ever reach a unanimous verdict. But if organic is better, how fair is it that only those consumers with the capacity to pay can afford to make more environmentally conscious and ethical choices? More consumers may wish to make such choices, but tight budgets can restrict consumers from acting on the values they hold. This does not just relate to organic food, but also in general when making more environmentally friendly choices from buying eco-friendly washing powders to a low emissions car. Also, focusing too much on the benefits of organic food can lead consumers to doubt conventional produce. Maybe this is a basic comment but before consumers get too hung up on, say, choosing between organic or non-organic fruit and vegetables, we should first assess if we eat enough of them in the first place and if choosing organic, because of the added cost, may limit our consumption of one vital element of a balanced diet.



Allergen food labelling

Identification of allergens on food labels vary greatly. This inconsistency means that consumers who suffer with food allergies must trawl ingredient lists with a fine tooth comb to avoid danger foods.

The presence of allergens in some foods is much clearer than in others. Bread made from wheat will naturally contain gluten and dairy products will obviously contain milk. But processed foods can contain ingredients that are not immediately obvious. For consumers who suffer with food allergies, checking food labels is very time consuming. But they must do this to ensure they do not eat substances to which they are allergic.

Pre-packaged foods must list all their ingredients. If a food contains specific allergens this must be stated on the label. This information can be presented in the foods ingredients, but could also be identified either on the front or back of the pack.

If a processed food contains any of the following ingredients, or a

derivative of the ingredient, the label must declare its presence:

- Celery and celeriac
- Cereals containing gluten
- Crustaceans e.g. crab, lobster, prawn
- Eggs
- Fish
- Lupin
- Milk (including lactose)
- Mustard
- Peanuts and all other nuts
- Sesame seeds
- Shellfish
- Soybean
- Sulphur dioxide and sulphur (over 10mg per kg or litre)

The allergic response

Our immune system responds when harmful bacteria and viruses enter the body by producing antibodies to

destroy these organisms. Allergic reactions are immune system responses. They occur when the body incorrectly recognises substances as harmful that are not normally harmful to the system, resulting in the production of substances, such as histamine, that attack the allergen. Hay fever is an allergic reaction and remedies that deal with its symptoms often have anti-histamine properties, which inhibit the production of this chemical by the immune system.

Types of allergy

Anaphylaxis is the most severe type of allergic reaction, the symptoms of which are usually immediate and severe. A large amount of immune system substances are produced and enter the blood stream. This has a

AT A GLANCE

.....
Allergies.

Anaphylaxis.

Labelling.

ALLERGEN INFORMATION

CONTAINS:

Oats, Barley, Hazelnuts

MAY CONTAIN:

Wheat, Rye, Milk, Sesame Seeds, Other Nuts

negative effect on the body, especially the circulatory system, which can result in symptoms such as shortness of breath, a drop in blood pressure and even loss of consciousness. The reaction can be reversed by an injection of adrenaline that relaxes the tensed blood vessels and muscles that lead to the dangerous symptoms. It can be fatal in severe cases. The allergens that most commonly cause this reaction are nuts (especially peanuts), shellfish, sesame seeds, dairy products, eggs and soya.

Other allergies have less severe symptoms and may not present themselves immediately after the allergen is consumed. This is because the immune system produces less of the reactive substance and it has a more localised effect. For example, eczema can be caused by allergies. The chemicals produced cause inflammation in skin cells. Less severe allergic reactions include other skin rashes, such as urticaria (more commonly known as hives) and digestive problems.

Coeliac disease occurs when the individual's immune system reacts abnormally to gluten found in many grains, such as wheat, oats, barley and rye. It can lead to poor absorption of nutrients and general digestive problems.

Intolerance

Food allergies should not be confused with food intolerances. They are not an allergic reaction, but an inability to properly digest the food. For example, lactose intolerance occurs when people do not produce the enzyme lactase that assists the digestion of lactose found in dairy products. Wheat intolerance occurs when gluten is not well digested and should not be confused with coeliac disease.

OUR LABELLING SURVEY

We surveyed over 50 products that included allergen information in addition to a declaration in the list of ingredients. The range of products included bread, breakfast cereals, biscuits, cakes, condiments, crackers, pasta sauces, sausages, and ready meals.

The foods we looked at were products where it was not clear from the product description that it may contain the allergens soya and nuts: 35% had nut warnings, 29% had soya warnings.

Most often, allergen information is located on the back of packs, close to the ingredients list. The text size varied and was sometimes very small. The format varies greatly. Some packs had 'allergens', 'this product contains' or simply 'contains'

followed by a list. Others had a separate box for allergy advice, made clearer by use of colour or an exclamation mark. The main concern is a lack of consistency.

Research on nut allergen labelling, carried out by the UK Food Standards Agency in 2001, found labelling inconsistent, confusing, difficult to read and locate on packaging. Our survey supports similar findings.

A standard format would make it easier for consumers to identify if certain allergens are present. But having said that, providing this information is voluntary. Manufacturers who provide this extra information are doing more than many others who just comply with legal requirements. To be compliant with food labelling legislation it is enough to state in the ingredients list that the allergen is present.



Diagnosis

The number of people with allergies, in particular food allergies, is thought to be increasing. Statistics suggest that 5% of children and 3% of adults suffer with food allergies. People who suffer must adopt restrictive diets to eliminate food allergens. It is important not to self diagnose as restricting intake of certain foods can make it more difficult to have a balanced diet.

An increasing number of methods can identify food allergies, such as eliminating the food from your diet to see if symptoms resolve. This is only suitable for less severe allergies. Vega testing diagnoses allergies using a machine that picks up abnormal electrical charges in response to placing a homeopathic dilution of the food allergen in the machine. This method is criticised as it does not have a basis in science.

If you suspect a food allergy, the best and most reliable diagnosis is a medical one. Blood tests can be carried out, testing for the presence of allergic substances, such as antibodies, to specific allergens. Skin testing involves pricking the skin with a small drop of the suspected food allergen. If the area swells or a rash develops, allergy is likely.

Trace of allergens

If the consumer is allergic to certain foods, even a trace of that food can bring on an allergic reaction. Cross-contamination can occur if the same processing equipment is used for different products or if foods are processed close to each other. Manufacturers are not required to state if a product is produced in a factory where foods that are potential allergens are also processed. But many do. We take a look at the implications for the consumer in the case of nut allergies, a serious anaphylactic allergic reaction.

May contain...

Many product labels state 'may contain nuts', 'may contain traces of nuts' or 'produced in a factory with nuts and seeds.' Of the products included in our survey, 35% had some form of nut allergy warning and 83% of those had 'may contain' statements (see *Our labelling survey*). What is difficult for nut allergy sufferers is that so many products state they may contain nuts. A clear statement saying 'not suitable for nut allergy sufferers' or simply 'contains nuts' is less frequently found on food labels.

Some products may state 'suitable for nut allergy sufferers'. This is the only

Useful contacts

Food Safety Authority of Ireland

Abbey Court
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Advice 1890 336 677
tel (01) 817 1300
fax (01) 817 1301
email info@fsai.ie
www.fsai.ie

Safefood

Headquarters
7 Eastgate Avenue
Eastgate
Little Island
Co. Cork
tel (021) 230 4100
fax (021) 230 4111
www.safefood.eu

Safefood Dublin Sub-Office

Block B
Abbey Court
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Helpdesk 1850 404 567
tel (01) 448 0600

Useful websites

The Irish Anaphylaxis Campaign
www.irishanaphylaxis.org

Food Standards Agency (UK)
www.food.gov.uk

Coeliac Society
www.coeliac.ie

way consumers with this allergy can be assured that the food contains no traces of nuts. But we did not find this on one single product surveyed. The consumer can then only assume that absence of information indicates suitability.

Consumers with nut allergies must rely on certain foods they know are suitable, which restricts consumer choice. Manufacturers sometimes provide additional support for allergy sufferers and on request may provide a list of their products that are free from nuts.

Good manufacturing practice that keeps products with nuts separate from products that do not contain nuts is not enough to protect against cross contamination. Accidental cross contamination can occur and because of the sensitivity of nut allergies, the slightest trace can cause a reaction. A nut free factory is the only real way to ensure no trace of nuts will be found in the food product. This may be why so few manufacturers state 'suitable for nut allergy sufferers' – because if accidental contamination occurs, it leaves them liable.

Gluten free?

Research suggests that coeliac disease is a relatively common condition in the Irish population. It is thought to affect between 1 in 200 to 300 people. It is triggered by gluten, the protein found in grains such as barley, rye, oats and wheat. Some carbohydrate foods are naturally gluten free, such as rice, potatoes, corn and the lesser known buckwheat and millet.

Grains containing gluten can be processed, or 'deglutenised', to reduce their gluten content and sold as flour or made into gluten free products. Deglutenised foods could, up to recently, contain gluten at a level of up to 200 ppm (parts per million) and be labelled as gluten free. If a food is naturally gluten free it should not have traces of gluten over 20 ppm. Threshold levels were set out by the 1983 Codex (an international body set up by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations and the World Health Organisation to develop food standards) standard for gluten free foods. The Codex standard was updated in 2007 and the level has been reduced to a maximum of 100ppm. But foods at this threshold can no longer be labelled gluten free, rather, they may state

'reduced gluten' or 'suitable for most coeliacs'. The exact wording is yet to be determined. This new threshold is likely to be adopted in the Irish market this month (June 2008).

The changes are very important as some coeliacs have a greater sensitivity to gluten than others. It remains unclear what level of gluten can result in a reaction. With a reduction in maximum permitted levels in deglutenised foods from 200ppm to 100ppm and accompanying labelling changes this is

“The FSAI has made it clear that there is no excuse for misleading labelling and the CAI seconds this.”

some improvement. From June, products labelled as 'gluten-free' must not contain gluten above 20ppm.

Another issue in relation to deglutenised flours is their nutritional value. The 1983 Codex standard states that the gluten free food should contain similar nutrients as the food it replaces. Codex standards are not binding and this aspect of the standard has received little attention. A high level of processing is required to remove the gluten from grains, which can also

remove important nutrients. Gluten is very important in baking; it gives bread its elasticity and enables it to rise.

Deglutenised flours are harder to bake with. Teagasc are currently carrying out research to help address this issue by investigating how to produce gluten-free baked goods from more nutritious grains, using different processes and additional ingredients that maintain a good structure when baked.

Labelling breaches

Investigations into breaches of labelling law are carried out by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI, see *Useful contacts*). In 2007, the FSAI uncovered a breakfast cereal labelled as 'gluten free' that actually contained high levels of gluten. Contamination of products that are gluten free can occur in the same way products that don't contain ingredients, such as nuts, may get contaminated with these allergens. The FSAI have prepared guidelines for the food industry to prevent the cross contamination of products with gluten, which includes spot checks and tests.

The FSAI has made it clear that there is no excuse for misleading labelling and the CAI seconds this. Consumers with food allergies place their trust in food labels. It is even more serious when a product claims to be free of an allergen and is then found to contain a high level of the allergen. Consumers with coeliac disease are more likely to buy foods that state they are gluten free. When they are then found to contain gluten this undermines the consumer's attempt to manage an already challenging dietary condition.

ALLERGY INFORMATION
CONTAINS Cow's Milk, Goat's Milk, Eggs, Wheat, Gluten.
No artificial colours or flavourings, or hydrogenated fat.

choice comment

If labelling is unclear, the consumer with a food allergy must be vigilant when buying food. This is not acceptable. Clearer labelling could lessen this burden and also reduce the chances of the consumer overlooking information and consuming a food that contains the allergic substance they must avoid. But these issues are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to challenges allergy sufferers face. Foods that are sold loose or baked on the premises do not require labelling. Eating out is a general nightmare as it is more difficult to gain assurances of what food contains. And when food labelling fails the consumer, allergies can be triggered, despite consumer vigilance. Food allergies can be severe, and even the less severe have a great effect on the consumers' health. It is long overdue for industry to acknowledge this fact and promote good information over unacceptable spin.



Staying safe in the sun

With summer (hopefully) fast approaching, it's time again to start thinking about protecting your skin from sun damage. We give you advice on how to stay safe in the sun and bring you five Choice Buy suncreams.

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in Ireland. One in every six men and women will get skin cancer by the age of 74, according to the Irish Cancer Society (see *Useful contacts*). It's estimated that 80 to 90% of skin cancer is caused by the sun's ultraviolet rays and can be prevented. This makes it even more important to use a suncream when out in the sun.

And even if you're not sunning yourself beside a swimming pool you need to consider sun protection. Anyone who spends time outdoors is susceptible to skin damage all year round, even in cloudy weather. It's estimated that 85% of UV rays can pass through clouds. Also if you are near snow, sand or water, they can reflect light

so you need to consider sun protection. So if you are going to be outside at all this summer, whether doing the garden or playing golf, you are susceptible to skin damage from the sun's rays.

For the test of suncreams we looked at SPF 15 for each of the products. SPF 15 gives medium protection from the sun, and the Irish Cancer Society recommends that this is the lowest SPF that should be used. Experts agree that only SPF 30 and above is considered high protection. Consumers tend to believe that if they use a high factor they can stay in the sun for longer and don't need to re-apply cream regularly. This is incorrect.

The main mistake people tend to make when it comes to using

suncream is that they forget to put cream on some areas, for example the backs of knees, the neck, and the tops of the ears. They also forget to apply regularly, and don't always use enough suncream.

What is SPF?

SPF stands for sun protection factor and refers to the level of protection from UVB rays you can expect from a product. The number essentially tells you how much protection you're getting. An SPF of 15 boosts your skin's natural protection by a factor of 15.

The SPF rating is calculated by comparing the amount of time needed to produce sunburn on protected skin to the amount of time needed to cause sunburn on unprotected skin.

AT A GLANCE

Skin protection.

Sun safety.

5 Choice Buys.

Many Irish people have very fair skin. If we take an example of such a person, their skin might normally turn red after ten minutes or so in the sun. This is considered to be their 'initial burning time'. If that person uses a suncream with SPF 2, it takes 20 minutes in the sun for that person's skin to turn red and if that person uses a sunscreen with SPF 15, the initial burning time is multiplied by 15, so it may take about two and a half hours for that person's skin to turn red.

However using a higher factor suncream does not mean that you can stay longer in the sun, it is still important to re-apply every two hours.

SPF 15 is considered medium protection but suncreams can be bought from SPF 2 to SPF 60+. Experts agree that products with SPF lower than six do not constitute products designed for sun protection.

UV what?

The sun produces two different types of ultraviolet (UV) radiation or rays that are potentially damaging to our skin. The first is UVA which can lead to premature skin aging and can cause skin cancer. This makes up about 95% of the UV radiation that reaches the earth.

The second type is UVB rays, which makes up the remaining 5% of UV rays. UVB rays are more dangerous to the skin and eyes than UVA rays and can lead to sunburn and skin cancer.

Suncreams contain active ingredients and work in two ways. They either absorb UV rays as they hit the skin and release the energy as heat or physical blockers reflect or scatter UV rays back off the skin. Suncreams offer one or both of these active ingredients.

Suncream and kids

Children's skin is very sensitive to the sun and should always be protected, even if they are just playing around in the garden. If

possible, it's best to keep young children and babies out of the sun, particularly between 11am and 3pm, when the sun is directly overhead and at its hottest. But trying to keep young children out of the sun, either when abroad or during the school holidays is no easy task. Clothing, a hat, sunglasses and shade can provide some protection, and of course slathering on the suncream.

The Irish Cancer Society recommends using an SPF 20 or higher and UVA protection of high or ultra high for young children. It also recommends using a suncream designed for children. While these creams contain the same protective chemicals as adult creams, they tend to have a gentler formulation and no fragrance.

All the suncreams in our test passed the water resistance test with flying colours, but it's even more important with children to choose a water resistant cream. And remember if your children are in and out of the water a lot it's important to re-apply the cream even more regularly.

It might also be advisable to do a 'patch test' with children to ensure there are no adverse reactions. This involves applying some cream to a small area of skin, and checking 24 hours later for any skin irritation.

How to apply suncream

- Firstly, use lots of suncream.
- Apply it thickly and evenly.
- Apply cream 20 minutes before exposure to the sun to allow the cream time to soak in.
- Reapply every two hours, or more often if you're in the water, and don't forget your ears, eyelids and lips.

Even though you may be wearing suncream it's important not to stay in the sun longer than recommended.

How much is 'lots'?

Most people don't use enough suncream and this can lower the effectiveness of the cream, increasing the risk of sunburn and

skin cancer. Using half the recommended amount of cream will only give about a third of the level of protection indicated by the SPF. But how much is enough?

Most of the suncreams we tested were not very clear about this on their labels. It is advised that if you are using a cream or gel, you need about a golf ball size of cream to cover the whole body. This is about a teaspoon for every arm or leg and more for the body. If using a spray, use about 175 squirts. When it comes to sun safety you can't be too careful so slather on the cream.

No such thing as total protection

The only way to completely protect your skin from sun damage is to stay out of the sun. It's very important to remember that no suncream can give total protection. Suncreams with 100% protection against damage from the sun do not exist. The use of suncream is intended to be part of normal life and doesn't extend the length of time you can stay in the sun.

Therefore, as well as applying lots of suncream regularly, there are other steps you can take to keep yourself safe in the sun. The hottest part of the day, when the sun is strongest, should be avoided where possible. This is between 11am and 3pm. When you are outside in the sun try to find an area of shade and wear a large brimmed hat, t-shirt and wrap around sunglasses to add to the protection given by your suncream. Babies and young children should not be exposed to the sun and heat where possible.

While all products tested were water resistant, remember this means they offer protection while swimming, not once you get out of the water, so it is always essential to re-apply cream after being in the water.

It's important also to check the 'use by' date. Most creams will last two to three years, so while it's ok to use last year's suncreams, it might be time to throw out any older bottles.

MODEL	SPECIFICATION				TEST PERFORMANCE			
	price (€)	price per litre (€)	quantity (ml)	product texture	type of container	labelling (10%)	claimed SPF	measured SPF
1 Garnier Ambre Solaire Clear Protect SPF 15	10 ^a	65	150	gel	bottle	★★★★	15	18.7
2 Boots Soltan Moisturising Sun Care Lotion SPF 15	13 ^a	32	400	lotion	bottle	★★★	15	15.2
3 Garnier Ambre Solaire Moisturising Protection Milk SPF 15	9 ^a	45	200	lotion	bottle	★★★★	15	16.3
4 Nivea Sun Moisturising Sun Spray 15	9 ^a	45	200	spray	pump dispenser	★★★	15	16.9
5 L'Oreal Paris Solar Expertise Advanced Anti-Aging Sun Protection Lotion SPF 15	8 ^a	54	150	lotion	bottle	★★★★	15	15.8
6 Piz Buin® in Sun SPF 15	9 ^a	44	200	lotion	bottle	★★★★	15	14.1
7 Malibu High Protection Lotion 15	6	30	200	lotion	bottle	★★★	15	10.2
8 Marks & Spencer Sun Formula Moisturising Lotion SPF 15	12 ^b	58	200	lotion	bottle	★★★★	15	7.1

^a Some supermarkets and pharmacies are offering either half price or buy one get one free on suncreams. We have indicated here the price from this offer. ^b Available as 3 for 2 offer.

Skin types

The type of skin you have can affect your sensitivity to the sun. While all skin types are at risk of sun damage and skin cancer, types I and II are at particular risk. Given that two thirds of Irish people have these skin types, it is essential that extra sun protection is used, even in Irish weather. See the table below for further details on skin types.

You may need to take special care if you have fair skin with lots of freckles that doesn't tan or burns before it tans. If you have naturally red or fair hair and blue green or grey eyes you may need to pay extra attention to your skin in the sun. The Irish Cancer Society advises that you take extra care if you have 50 or more moles, have a history of sunburn, have just received treatment that affects your immune system, or have already had skin cancer.

Skin type	Unexposed skin colour	UVR sensitivity	Sunburn history	Tanning ability
I	White	Extremely Sensitive	Always burns on minimal exposure	Never tans
II	White	Very Sensitive	Burns very readily	Tans slowly and with difficulty, freckles common
III	White	Moderately Sensitive	May burn on regular sun exposure with no protection	Tans relatively slowly
IV	Light Brown	Relatively Tolerant	Burns rarely	Tans rapidly on minimal sun exposure
V	Brown	Extremely Variable	Despite pigmentation, may burn very easily on sun exposure	Difficult to detect on heavily pigmented skin
VI	Black	Relatively Insensitive	Rarely burns (sunburn is difficult to detect on heavily pigmented skin)	Difficult to detect on heavily pigmented skin

Adapted from Irish Cancer Society (see Useful Contacts)

Useful contacts

Boots

1890 708 091
www.boots.ie

Garnier

1850 604 404
www.garnier.co.uk

Irish Cancer Society

tel (01) 2310 500
www.cancer.ie/sunsmart

Nivea

www.nivea.ie

Solar Expertise

tel 0044 20 8762 4000
www.loreal.co.uk

THE LENGTHS WE GO TO...

For this test we assessed the product's SPF as well as a measurement of the water resistance and UVA protection factor. Determination of SPF is done with twelve testers according to the International SPF Test Method. Where the measured SPF is higher than the claimed SPF this means that the product provides protection to the largest number of people taking into account the variability of human skin.

Water resistance is investigated according to the Shower methodology. For this test subjects have sun cream applied to their back and after fifteen minutes they stand in a shower cubicle for three minutes.

Cosmetic acceptability was determined via a questionnaire given to the panel asking about consistency, whitening, stickiness, speed of absorption and fragrance, among other things.



				SCORE %
difference to label SPF (45%)	water resistance	UVA ratio (35%)	cosmetic acceptability	
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	69
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	69
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	66
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	65
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	65
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	50
★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	31
★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	19

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

SPECIFICATION:

Price: Typical retailer's price if you shop around.

Price per litre: Allows for better price comparison for different creams.

TEST PERFORMANCE:

Labelling: refers to claims or warning on the bottles.

Claimed SPF: As indicated on the bottle by the manufacturer.

Measured SPF: As measured in the lab.

Water resistance: How water resistant the product is.

UVA ratio: This is a characterisation of the UVA protection of the product

Cosmetic acceptability: all products were either good or very good

Report by
Jenny Harrow 

choice buys

1: Garnier Ambre Solaire Clear Protect SPF 15, €10, €65 per litre

This **Choice Buy** suncream comes in the form of a clear gel and our testers appreciated that it, obviously, left no whitening on their skin after use. This product is very easy to spread and is quickly absorbed, but doesn't have the greatest fragrance. There are clear instructions for the application and re-application of the product, but no indication of how much to use. Although the manufacturers claim the product is SPF 15 our tests showed it to be SPF 18.7 and it offered good UVA protection.

2: Boots Soltan Moisturising Sun Care Lotion SPF15, €13, €32 per litre

This **Choice Buy** lotion comes in a 400ml bottle, the largest we tested and also the best value per litre of our **Choice Buys**. It has instructions on how to apply the cream and also how much to use. The lotion has a good appearance and consistency and left very little white on the skin. Our testers found that it wasn't very sticky and absorbed easily into

the skin. The bottle is labelled SPF 15 and indeed our tests confirm that this cream is SPF 15.2. It also provides good UVA protection.

3: Garnier Ambre Solaire Moisturising Protection Milk SPF15, €9, €45 per litre

When tested in our lab, this **Choice Buy** lotion turned out to be SPF 16.3, higher than the stated SPF 15. As with all our other **Choice Buys**, it also provides good protection against UVA radiation. As with the **Choice Buy** Ambre Solaire Clear Protect there are instructions for use and re-application on the bottle, but no indication of how much to use. Our testers really liked the consistency of the cream and found it easy to spread and absorb, with little whitening or stickiness.

4: Nivéa Sun Moisturising Sun Spray 15, €9, €45 per litre

This **Choice Buy** suncream comes in the form of a spray with a pump dispenser. As with all our other **Choice Buy** suncreams the SPF tested in the lab

was higher than the claimed SPF 15 at 16.9. All of our **Choice Buy** suncreams proved to be water resistant and this spray is no different. It has instructions on how to apply the cream, but instruction on how often to re-apply are slightly less clear and there is no indication of how much cream to use. Our testers found the cream easy to spread and there was no whitening of the skin or stickiness.

5: L'Oreal Paris Solar Expertise Advanced Anti-Ageing Sun Protection Lotion SPF 15, €8, €54 per litre

There are very clear instructions of how to apply and re-apply the suncream on the bottle of this **Choice Buy** lotion, but no indication of how much to use. Our testers liked the appearance of the cream and found that it was easy to spread and left no whiteness on the skin. As with all the other creams we tested to see if the SPF claimed on the bottle was in fact correct and in the case of this **Choice Buy** lotion the lab found it to be SPF 15.8.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

So what should you look for when buying a suncream? Firstly check that the product protects against both UVA and UVB rays. For UVA protection look for four or five star protection. The higher the SPF the greater the protection against UVB rays. Below, we give an indication of the protection you can expect from each of the different SPF levels.

Suncreams can be very expensive. The most expensive, and also the best we tested, the **Choice Buy** Garnier Ambre Solaire Clear Protect SPF 15 (1) is €130 a litre and €20 for a 150ml bottle at full price. When looking at prices for sun creams, however, *Consumer Choice* noticed that many supermarkets and pharmacies are offering suncreams with special offers,

such as half price or 'buy one get one free'. While 'buy one get one free' offers may encourage consumers to buy more than they need, if you use more than one bottle of suncream over the course of the summer they can offer good value. In our table we have marked any of the creams we found on special offer.

An SPF between 6 and 14 offers low protection.

An SPF between 15 and 29 offers medium protection.

An SPF between 30 and 59 offers high protection.

An SPF above 60 offers very high protection.

Child car seats

In accordance with EU child safety laws it is compulsory for all children to travel in a suitable child seat, booster seat or booster cushion. We bring you our latest child car seat test results to help you find the best car seat for your child.

Maxi-Cosi and Britax are two of the major brands on the Irish market when it comes to child car seats, with their range of seats available from most major retailers. But for this report *Consumer Choice* has taken a look at some of the smaller brands to see if they are worth considering. Our seven **Choice Buys** are from Jané, Graco, Chicco, Hauck, Bébé Confort and Silvercross. Römer is a new brand from Germany that will be brought into Ireland by Britax. The Römer Baby Safe Plus Isofix (1) will be available from June 2008 at an estimated cost of €199, but the test results impressed *Consumer Choice* so much that we decided to include it.

And the good news is that even the seats that aren't quite up to **Choice Buy** standards performed satisfactorily in the safety tests. All seats have been rigorously tested (see *The lengths we go to* for more information) so you can rest assured that all our **Choice Buys** are among the safest out there. The testing focuses on safety as well as ease of use and comfort, meaning that if you do have a serious car crash your child could be better protected from injury in one of our **Choice Buy** car seats.

It's the law

In September 2006 new European laws were introduced with regard to

children travelling in cars. On its website the Road Safety Authority (see *Useful Contacts*) explain that it is now compulsory for all children to travel in the correct child seat, booster seat or booster cushion. They also have a DVD and booklet available with advice on how to keep your child safe while travelling in the car.

Children under three must not travel in a car or goods vehicle unless they are restrained in the correct seat. Children over three and under 150cm, about eleven or twelve years old, must use the correct child seat, booster seat or booster cushion. If seat belts are not fitted in the car, children over the

AT A GLANCE

.....
Safety first.

The law.

7 Choice Buys.

Useful contacts

Bébé Confort
Dorel Ireland
tel (01) 429 4055
www.bebéconfort.com

Chicco
J. Dougherty & Sons Ltd.
tel (048) 2587 8300
www.chicco.co.uk

Graco
tel 0818 221 422
www.graco.co.uk

Hauck
www.hauckuk.com

Jané
Johnston Prams &
Buggies Ltd
tel (048) 9084 9045
www.johnstonprams.co.uk

Road Safety Authority
locall 1890 50 60 80
www.rsa.ie/childsafetyin-cars

Römer
www.britax-roemer.de

Silver Cross
tel 0044 1756 702412
www.silvercross.co.uk

age of three must sit in the back seat, not the front.

It is the responsibility of the driver of the car to ensure that all children under 17 years old use the correct seat. The only exception to these laws is in a taxi, but safety belts must be worn where available. Car seats must also be up to date with EU or United Nations- Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE) standards, as are all of the seats we tested.

The Road Safety Authority also warns that rearward-facing child car seats must never be used in the front passenger seat of cars with an active airbag. This is of vital importance and cannot be stressed enough.

Weight groups

So what is the correct child car seat? Each car seat is suitable for a particular group or groups based on the weight of the child. We have indicated below an approximate age that this corresponds to, but you should consider the weight of the child rather than the age when choosing your car seat.

- **Group 0:** From zero to ten kilograms, approximately from birth to about one year.
- **Group 0+:** From zero to 13kg,

from birth to about 15 months.

- **Group I:** From nine kilograms to 18kg, from one year up to approximately four years.
- **Group II:** From 15kg to 25kg, from about three years to seven years.
- **Group III:** From 22kg to 36kg, from about six years to twelve years.

Types of seats

Rearward facing baby seat

The group 0 or 0+ baby seats are designed for babies from birth to about 13kg. They offer greater support for the head and neck of the baby, and therefore you would ideally keep the child in this type of seat until they have reached the maximum weight or their head is higher than the top of the seat. It is very important, however, that you never put a rearward facing seat in the front seat of your car if you have passenger airbags. Some group 0+ car seats come as part of a travel system. See our article on pushchairs in *Consumer Choice*, May 2008 for more information on travel systems.

Forward facing child seat

A forward facing child seat is suitable for children from about nine

kilograms to 18kg, group I. The child seat is secured by the adult seat belt, and the baby or toddler is secured into the seat using the seat's five point safety harness. They have adjustable seating positions to make them more comfortable for your child.

Booster seat

A booster seat raises your child up in the seat. They come either with or without an integral harness system. If they come without a harness the child is secured in the seat with the adult seat belt. They also function to give the child a better view out the window. These can be used from 15kg to 25kg. Some booster seats can be converted into a booster cushion by removing the seat's back rest.

Booster cushion

A booster cushion performs a similar function to a booster seat but without an integral harness to keep the child in place. It is therefore important to ensure that the seatbelt is properly adjusted. These can be used with children from 22kg to 36kg.

Isofix

Isofix is a new standard system that makes it easier and safer to install a car seat in your car. Most new cars come with isofix attachment points

MODEL	SPECIFICATION				TEST PERFORMANCE			
	price (€)	weight group	tested as	weight of seat (kg)	SAFETY (50%) overall safety	front crash	side crash	seat design
NEWBORN								
1 Römer Baby Safe Plus Isofix	199 ^a	0 - 13kg	0+ Isofixbasis	4	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
2 Jané Strata	200	0 - 13kg	0+	4.5	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
3 Graco Logico S HP	158	0 - 13kg	0+ Basis	4	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
4 Chicco Autofix Plus	149	0 - 13kg	0+ Basis	4	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★
5 Hauck Zero Plus	69	0 - 13kg	0+	3	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★
6 Mutsy Safe 2 Go	160	0 - 13kg	0+	4.5	★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★
7 Mutsy Traveller	220	0 - 10kg	0	4	★★★	★★★	★★	★★★★
OLDER CHILD								
8 Bébé Confort Moby	129	15 - 36kg	II/III	4	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★
9 Silvercross Navigator	199	15 - 36kg	II/III	6.5	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★
10 Bébé Confort Axiss	280	9 - 18kg	I	15	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★
11 Jané Indy Plus Team	189	15 - 36kg	II/III	6.5	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★
12 Recaro Monza	149	15 - 35kg	II/III	5	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★
13 Mothercare Motion	129	9 - 18kg	I	7	★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★

^a available from June 2008, this is an approximate price.

built into the car as standard and into which you can 'plug' your child car seat. It essentially anchors the child seat directly into the car without needing to use the adult seat belts.

Some parents may worry about having a car seat incorrectly fitted in their car. Isofix helps to eliminate this concern as it is considered to be more secure than the seat belt method. Isofix makes it quicker and easier to attach the car seat to the car, and also makes the seat more secure.

Since February 2006, all new ECE-approved cars are equipped with isofix anchorage points, but before buying an isofix car seat check that your car is compatible with isofix. Sometimes this is available as a free option.

Most cars come with two isofix fixing points, but some are now

equipped with three, the third being at the top of the seat. This should in theory hold the seat even more secure, but not all cars are equipped with the third fixing point.

Advice on buying and installation

When you are buying and installing a child car seat look for the following things:

- Make sure you have selected a seat from the correct group according to the weight of your child. (see *Weight groups*)
- It is not advisable to buy a second-hand car seat, as you may not know the history of the seat and it may already have been in a crash.
- Try the seat in your car before you buy to make sure that it fits correctly. Most retailers will help

you with this and show you how to correctly install it in your car.

- Make sure you follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully when installing the seat. If it is correctly installed it should not move or slide around excessively.
- Child car seats should be fitted in the back of the car if possible. If this is not possible push the front seat back as far as possible. Remember a rearward-facing child car seats must never be used in the front passenger seat of cars with an active airbag.
- Practise fitting the seat a few times before you need to use it.
- Fasten seat belts and harnesses snugly.
- Use the seat for every journey no matter how short.

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Specification:

Price: Typical retailer's price if you shop around.

Weight group: See *Weight groups* section for further information.

Tested as: The configuration tested.

Weight of seat: The weight of the seat rounded to

the nearest half kilogram.

Test performance:

Overall safety: The combined safety of the child car seat from the side and front crash test results, as well as the seat design.

Front crash/ side crash: Using forces that accurately reflect what happens in extreme crashes, crashes are simulated using front and side crashes.

Seat design: Incorporates ratings for belt routing, seat stability and the head rest.

Fastening buckle: How easy it is to fasten a child into the seat.

Fitting in car: How easy it is to correctly install the seat in the car.

Instruction manual: How clear and comprehensive the instructions are.

Incorrect use: How well the seat is designed in order to prevent incorrect use.

SCORE %

EASE OF USE AND COMFORT (50%)

incorrect use	fastening buckle	fitting in car	instruction manual	SCORE %
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	80
★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	76
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	76
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	70
★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	70
★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	51
★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	49
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	73
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	71
★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	59
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	57
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	48
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	42



Each of the seats was tested for comfort and ease of use with live users who weren't slow to give their opinions!

Report by
Jenny Harrow

choice buys

GROUP 0/ 0+

1: Römer Baby Safe Plus Isofix approx. €199

This baby car seat is currently being brought into the Irish market and is available from June 2008. The **Choice Buy** Römer Baby Safe Plus Isofix was tested both with and without the isofix-base, and although it performed very well without the base, when tested with the isofix-base attached it came top of table. The base is included in the set and can then be left in your car after fitting. In our safety tests the child restraint was very stable and gave excellent head support. The lab also found that there was very little danger of installing the seat incorrectly and the instructions and warnings were very clear. Buckling up was easy and this is a very light seat making it easy to transport.

2: Jané Strata €200

The **Choice Buy** Jané Strata baby seat with harness system is rearward facing with a three-point car seat belt. The lab found this a very safe infant carrier with relatively straight back rest. The harness can be adjusted to different heights without having to unthread the seat belts. It performed very well in our safety tests, offering excellent head support and staying very steady. Although the installation was slightly complicated there is little danger of installing it incorrectly as the instructions were clear. It offers good leg support and padding and has a good finish quality. Cleaning the seat cover was a bit complicated though.

3: Graco Logico S HP with base €158

This is a good performing baby seat with a separate

base, which can remain in the car after fitting. The baby shell is then easy to install onto an already mounted base. The base angle is adjustable to fit the passenger seat inclination. This seat performed well in both front and side crash tests, and has good belt routing. The child restraint remained stable in the car during the crash tests and the head support is excellent. Installation was easy with little danger of doing it wrong, with clear instructions and warnings. It's a very lightweight seat and the seat cover can be easily removed and is machine washable.

4: Chicco Autofix Plus €149

This **Choice Buy** baby seat had a good overall test score when tested both with and without the base attached. If the base is installed it can be left in the car after fitting and uses a three-point seat belt. It performed slightly better in the front crash test than in the side crash test, but offers good belt routing and excellent head support. Installation and buckling up were easy and the instructions and warnings are fairly easy to understand. It is a lightweight seat making it easy to transport. It also offers good leg support and good padding. We did find however that cleaning the seat cover was complicated.

5: Hauck Zero Plus €69

This is a lightweight yet tight infant carrier with good test results. The seat belt guides are partly hidden, however, by a badly fitted cover. The **Choice Buy** Hauck Zero Plus performed very well in our safety tests, in both front and side crashes, and has good belt

routing. Although the installation is complicated the instructions are fairly easy to understand and there is little danger of installing the seat incorrectly. Buckling the child into the seat is easy. This very light seat also offers excellent padding and leg support. Cleaning the seat cover is, however, a bit complicated.

GROUP I, II, III

8: Bébé Confort Moby €129

This is a good quality child booster seat with backrest for children aged four and up. The **Choice Buy** Bébé Confort Moby performed particularly well in the side crash tests. The belt routing was excellent and it was easy to adjust the size on the child. This lightweight seat was easy to install correctly and the instructions and warnings were straightforward. Again this seat provides good leg support and excellent padding as well as providing the child with a good view out of the car. The finish quality is excellent, although cleaning the cover was a bit complicated.

9: Silvercross Navigator €199

This **Choice Buy** Silvercross Navigator is a high quality booster seat with backrest for children aged four and up. It had good belt routing and head support in our crash tests and did particularly well in the side crash. It's very easy to install and buckle your child up, with simple to understand warnings and instructions. As with the **Choice Buy** Bébé Confort Moby (8), the child has a clear view out of the car and it offers good leg support and padding. Cleaning the seat cover was complicated but the finish quality on the seat is good.



The **Choice Buy** Römer Baby Safe Plus Isofix came top of table when tested with the isofix-base attached.



The **Choice Buy** Jané Strata baby seat is a very safe infant carrier.



The **Choice Buy** Chicco Autofix Plus baby seat had a good overall test score.

THE LENGTHS WE GO TO...

EU regulation says that all child car seats, to meet the compulsory standard (ECE R44.03), must withstand a low-speed front crash test, equivalent to about 50 kmph, without a child suffering serious injury. For our test, seats were tested both for safety using crash tests, and for ease of use and comfort. The child car seats were tested using the same strict crash tests used by EuroNCAP for adult protection.

Because the safety of the child is paramount we tested for both front and side crashes conducted at about 65kmph, making them stricter than the legal requirement. The car seats were fitted to real car bodies, and child crash test dummies were used to analyse the results of the crash tests, thus emulating a possible real life car crash. The tests also assessed how easy the seats were to install in the car, how easy it was to strap the children in, how comfortable they were for the child and how easy it was to clean them.



★ The **Choice Buy** Hauck Zero Plus performed very well in our safety tests, in both front and side crashes.



★ The **Choice Buy** Bébé Confort Moby performed particularly well in the side crash tests.

★ The **Choice Buy** Graco Logico S HP child restraint remained stable in the car during the crash tests.



★ This **Choice Buy** Silvercross Navigator is a good quality booster seat with backrest for children aged four and up.





The Choice Buy Wilkinson Sword Quattro for Women gave a very smooth shave.



The Choice Buy Philips Satinelle Soft is a good ergonomic shape.



Hair today, gone tomorrow!

Ladies, the summer is coming and it's time to decide how to keep those pins smooth and fuzz-free. We look at the pros and cons of the different options for hair removal and bring you test results from some of the products on the market.

For us ladies the sun brings the delight of pretty skirts and short sleeve blouses, but it also brings the problem of staying hair-free. The big dilemma is whether to go for the painful and longer lasting options like waxing or epilation, or to take the short term, relatively pain-free option of shaving or using a depilatory cream. This is a very personal choice so we have outlined the pros and cons of each below as well as giving tips on how to get the best results. *Consumer Choice* has also tested some of the products

on the market to see how they performed in terms of hair removal and convenience and as always we bring you our **Choice Buys**.

Shaving

Essentially a sharpened metal blade cuts off the hair at the skin's surface. The results last about one to three days. Contrary to popular belief it doesn't make hair grow faster, thicker or darker.

With an electric razor there is less likelihood of cutting yourself compared to wet razors. It can be

more convenient than wet shaving because you don't need water and shaving foam, although some can also be used wet.

A shaving system has a non-disposable handle that uses replaceable blade cartridges. When they become blunt, blades must be replaced, and can be expensive. These razors and blades are widely available from pharmacies, supermarkets and even petrol stations and convenience stores. Shaving systems tend to have more features than disposable razors



The **Choice Buy** Gillette Venus Vibrance is easy to clean under running water.

The **Choice Buy** Braun Silk-épil Xelle has very good handling and is easy to clean.



such as spring-loaded blades, swivel heads and lubricating strips.

With disposable razors, as with shaving systems a metal blade cuts the hair, but these razors do not have replaceable heads and so are designed to be thrown out when the blade becomes blunt. Some of the expensive disposable razors may also have some of the features mentioned above, such as lubricating strips.

Pros: It's fast, usually painless and you can do it yourself at home. Shaving is probably the easiest method of hair removal.

Cons: It can cause razor burn, bumps, nicks and cuts. The results are not very long-lasting and you may need to shave daily to stay hair-free. Hair can grow back stubbly and ingrown hairs can develop, especially in the sensitive bikini area.

Tips: You'll get a smoother result if you shave after a few minutes in the shower. The hot water will help soften the hair and open the follicles. Pull your skin taut and use long careful strokes rather than short ones. Using a shaving cream or gel may also help protect sensitive skin.

Epilators

An epilator is similar to an electric razor, but instead of cutting the hair it has a row of tiny rotating tweezers that remove the hair at the root. It's good for legs and arms and results can last up to four weeks.

Pros: The effects are long lasting. Hair can grow back fine and soft.

Cons: It may be 'uncomfortable', especially on sensitive areas and can be difficult to use on the backs of legs. It can lead to irritated skin and ingrown hairs. Discomfort may be reduced however after a few uses, when the skin gets used to the process.

Tips: Exfoliating your legs prior to epilation will get rid of dead skin cells and provide a good base for the tweezers. Make sure you have the skin pulled taut to avoid pinching.

Wax

A sticky wax is spread on the area of skin where there is unwanted hair. The wax either has a strip attached to it, or in the case of hot wax a cloth strip is applied to it and then quickly pulled off, taking the hair root with it. This can be done by a beautician or at home. The effects can last from three to six weeks. It works well on the legs, bikini area, upper lip and eyebrows.

Pros: Waxing leaves the area smooth and the effects are relatively long lasting. Hair re-growth may be lighter and softer than other methods of hair removal because the root of the hair is removed rather than being cut.

Cons: This method of hair removal can be 'uncomfortable'. Because the hair is pulled out of the skin at the root it can sting more than a bit. You may experience temporary redness, inflammation or bumps and the wax can be messy. Professional waxing can also be more expensive than other methods of hair removal. People with moles or skin irritations may also want to avoid waxing.

Tips: It may be better to get a beautician to do this for the first time before you try it at home. For optimal waxing hair should ideally be three to five millimetres long.

Depilatory cream

Depilatory creams work by removing hair from the skin surface. Chemicals react with protein in the hair so that it dissolves and can be washed away. It can last several days to two weeks, but often requires use every two to three days. It works best on legs, underarms and bikini areas.

Pros: It works quickly and the creams are relatively cheap in most pharmacies and supermarkets. Hair grows back less stubbly than after shaving.

Cons: It can however be messy and some people may not like the strong smell. If you have sensitive skin, you may have a reaction to some of the chemicals in the cream, so it is always advisable to do a 'patch test'. Depilatories may not work as well on coarse hair.

Tips: Read the product instructions carefully and only use the amount of cream and length of time recommended. Before using the cream on the bikini area, read the product label to make sure that it can be used on this sensitive area.

Ingrown hairs

Ingrown hairs can be a problem no matter what method of hair removal you choose. They are caused when the hair begins to grow within the surrounding tissue rather than growing out of the follicle. The hair curls and starts growing into the skin, irritating it. Although most people shave in the opposite direction from hair growth, shaving in the direction that hair grows (e.g. hair on your leg grows down) may help avoid ingrown hairs.

Exfoliating before and after hair removal can help to avoid ingrown hairs. If you do get an ingrown hair try exfoliating and moisturising the area. You can also apply an antiseptic cream to prevent infection and some people recommend holding a hot towel to the area to help soften the skin allowing the hair to work its way out. There are also products available to help with this problem. But if you notice redness or swelling, or if it's painful, see your doctor.

AT A GLANCE

.....
Hair removal options.

5 Choice Buys.

choice buys

Shaving systems

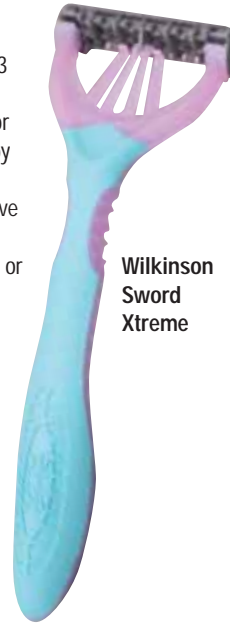
4: Gillette Venus Vibrance €13 replacement blades €13 for three
This **Choice Buy** wet razor, although expensive, was the favourite razor of seven of our panel of testers. They found that it fit perfectly in the hand and was easy to clean under running water. It was quick and easy to change the blades with little danger of cutting yourself. The instructions have good illustrations for use. It performed excellently on both legs and armpits and caused little or no pain, pulling, burning or skin irritation.

5: Wilkinson Sword Quattro for Women €8 replacement blades €8.59 for three
Five of our testers chose this as their **Choice Buy** shaving system. They felt that it was a good weight and had good handling, with no expenditure of energy necessary to use it. Cleaning was easy, but they found that some hairs got stuck behind the grating. There is a button made out of rubber for changing the blades making it easy to do so. However, there is nearly no instruction at all. Again it gave a very smooth, close shave with little or no irritation to the skin.

Disposable Razors

7: Wilkinson Sword Xtreme 3 Beauty €4.50 for four razors

The Wilkinson Sword Xtreme 3 Beauty disposable razor was favoured by five of our panellists. It gave a very smooth shave and little or no pain or skin irritation. While this is a very lightweight razor, some testers found it a bit too lightweight and not very easy to clean. There were hardly any instructions at all and only one picture.



Wilkinson Sword Xtreme

Epilators

9: Braun Silk-épil Xelle €93

This **Choice Buy** was a favourite of seven members of our panel of testers. It has very good handling and was easy to clean with good access to all areas and a stable brush. The switch is easy to handle with a good grip and it's easy to change between speed settings. It comes with multiple attachments and a trimmer which are easy to change and our testers liked that you can also use this appliance to shave as well. It comes with detailed instructions and good fold-out pictures.

10: Philips Satinelle Soft €60

This **Choice Buy** epilator was a favourite of five of our panel of testers. They found that it was a good ergonomic shape and lightweight, but the switch was not easy to operate. However, the curved shape of the head adapts well to the skin. It was easy to clean with good access to all areas. Both speed settings are easy to set, but as already mentioned, the switch is a bit difficult to operate. The epilator comes with multiple attachments but no hair trimmer. The instructions had good fold-out pictures but the contrast was poor.

MODEL	SPECIFICATION				TEST PERFORMANCE
	price (€)	price replacement razors (€)	power supply	wet use	HAIR REMOVAL (60%) shaving/epilation
ELECTRIC SHAVERS					
1 Philips Ladyshave Double Contour HP6335	45	n/a	rechargeable		★★★
2 Braun Silk&Soft SB28	59	n/a	rechargeable	✓	★★★
3 Philips Ladyshave Body Contour HP6319	40	n/a	rechargeable	✓	★★★
SHAVING SYSTEMS					
4 Gillette Venus Vibrance	13	13 ^b	n/a	✓	★★★★★
5 Wilkinson Sword Quattro for Women	8	8.59 ^b	n/a	✓	★★★★★
6 Wilkinson Sword Intuition Plus - Hydra Soft	10.50	10.59 ^b	n/a	✓	★★★
DISPOSABLE RAZORS					
7 Wilkinson Sword Xtreme 3 Beauty	4.50 ^a	n/a	n/a	✓	★★★★★
8 Gillette Sensor 3	6.50 ^a	n/a	n/a	✓	★★★★★
EPILATORS					
9 Braun Silk-épil Xelle 5395	93	n/a	mains		★★★★
10 Philips Satinelle Soft	60	n/a	mains		★★★★
11 Braun Silk-épil Soft Perfection 5318	55	n/a	mains		★★★★
12 Philips Satinelle Ice	70	n/a	mains		★★★★

^a Price for four razors. ^b Price for three razors.

ALSO WORTH CONSIDERING

Electric Shavers

1: Philips Ladyshave Double Contour HP6335 €45

None of the electric shavers were **Choice Buys** but if this is the method of hair removal you prefer then the Philips Ladyshave Double Contour came top of the table. It has a good hand-fit and the size and weight are comfortable, but a bit slippery. Our testers found that it wasn't very easy to clean as hairs can stick in the shaving head. The switch is easy to operate and grip. Our testers liked the separate trimmer. The instructions come in a handy folder but had poor contrast.



Philips Ladyshave Double Contour HP6335

THE LENGTHS WE GO TO...

All shavers were tested on legs and armpits and given an overall result rated by the panellist and an expert. Each panel contained twenty people. Areas were inspected for pulling and twitching, burning or sore skin and any skin injuries or cuts. Panellists were also questioned and re-growth was assessed after one week. A second panel of twenty people tested the epilators. Only legs were tested and re-growth was checked after two weeks.



Useful contacts

Braun

tel 0044 800 7837010
www.braun.com

Gillette

1800 509 301
www.gillettevenus.com

Philips Ireland

tel (01) 7640000
www.philips.ie

Wilkinson Sword

tel 0044 1494 533300
www.wilkinsonsword.co.uk

SCORE %

skin irritation and painfulness	CONVENIENCE (40%)			SCORE %
	handling	cleaning	instruction	
★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	52
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	51
★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	51
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	84
★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	77
★★★★	★	★★	★★★★	35
★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★	70
★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	65
★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	74
★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	70
★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	68
★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	64

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Specification:

Price: Typical retailer's price if you shop around.

Power supply: For electrical products the power source is indicated, either rechargeable batteries or connected to the mains through a socket.

Wet use: We indicate here if the product can be used in the shower.

Test performance:

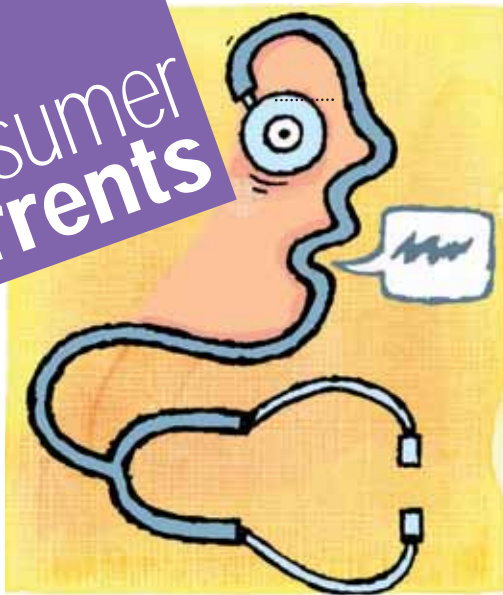
Shaving/epilation: Includes ratings for the initial result and re-growth after one week for shaving and two weeks for epilation.

Ease of handling: An assessment of the size and shape of the product as well as the centre of gravity, smoothness of the surface and the force or pressure needed.

Cleaning: An assessment of the ease of cleaning and any instructions on how to keep the product clean.

User instruction: Any printed material and user instructions were examined in terms of degree of detail, illustrations and ease of understanding.

Report by
Jenny Harrow



Plain speaking

It's not the greatest problem faced by our healthcare system, but British medical journal *The Lancet* claims that the use of jargon, widespread in the medical profession, may actually endanger patients. Apparently the greatest danger comes from 'sound-alike' terms, often derived from Latin, which can be easily misheard and misunderstood in stressful situations such as A&E. Potential for mistakes is increased by the multicultural nature of modern hospitals: unfamiliar accents and linguistic idiosyncrasies can result in serious misunderstandings.

For example, 'hypo' and 'hyper' are terms that sound very similar, but which have opposite meanings. If a patient with

hypotension (low blood pressure) was treated for hypertension (high blood pressure) the results could be disastrous. Other confusing pairs of sound-alikes with very different meanings include 'intra' and 'inter' and 'anti' versus 'ante' (just imagine anti-natal care!).

The Lancet suggests that it's time for the medical profession to demystify, and we agree. Surely a move to plain English would not only lessen the risk of mistakes made by overworked doctors, but would also empower patients and help them to understand exactly what's going on when they have to spend time in hospital.

Pet salmonella

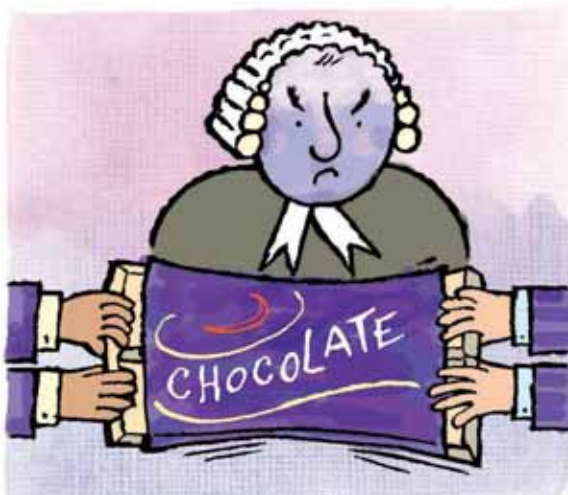
Contrary to popular belief, salmonella isn't just something you get from undercooking chicken or eating in dodgy restaurants. A new report from the HSE has warned that pet reptiles can also spread the disease. Research carried out by two public health doctors found that direct or indirect contact with snakes and similar pets such as turtles and terrapins was linked to 5% of all cases of the disease in the south-east of the country. Salmonella is particularly dangerous for children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with a weakened immune system.

You don't have to say goodbye to your beloved pet turtle, but it's important to take a few basic hygiene precautions. Wash your hands with soap and water after handling reptiles or their cages, and ensure that children do the same. Clothes that a reptile has touched should be washed, and surfaces should be cleaned with disinfectant. Reptiles and all other pets should be kept away from food preparation areas, and should not be allowed to wander freely around the house.



The doctors who issued the report have called for public education on the handling of reptiles in order to prevent further infection. They recommend that pregnant women and families with small children do not keep reptiles as pets.

Seeing purple



We all know how jealously companies guard their images, but sometimes it seems to go a bit too far. In Australia, Cadbury recently lost a legal attempt to gain sole use of the colour purple for confectionery, claiming that consumers could confuse rival Darrell Lea's products with theirs because of similarly coloured packaging – regardless of the Darrell Lea name and logo, which features prominently on packaging and advertising.

While it might appear as if this is a case of a company taking itself a little too seriously, Cadbury isn't alone in its trademark endeavours.

In a similar spirit, Apple computers are trying to prevent the city of New York (the Big Apple) from using an apple image in a public awareness campaign. The GreeNYC campaign logo shows a stylised apple with a stalk and a leaf that Apple claims infringes on its own well-known logo. Ironically, Apple has in the past been on the receiving end of trademark infringement lawsuits, in particular a longstanding and well-publicised battle with Apple Corps, the company set up by the Beatles to manage their business interests. Apple won that battle, but the outcome of Apple vs. the Big Apple remains to be seen.

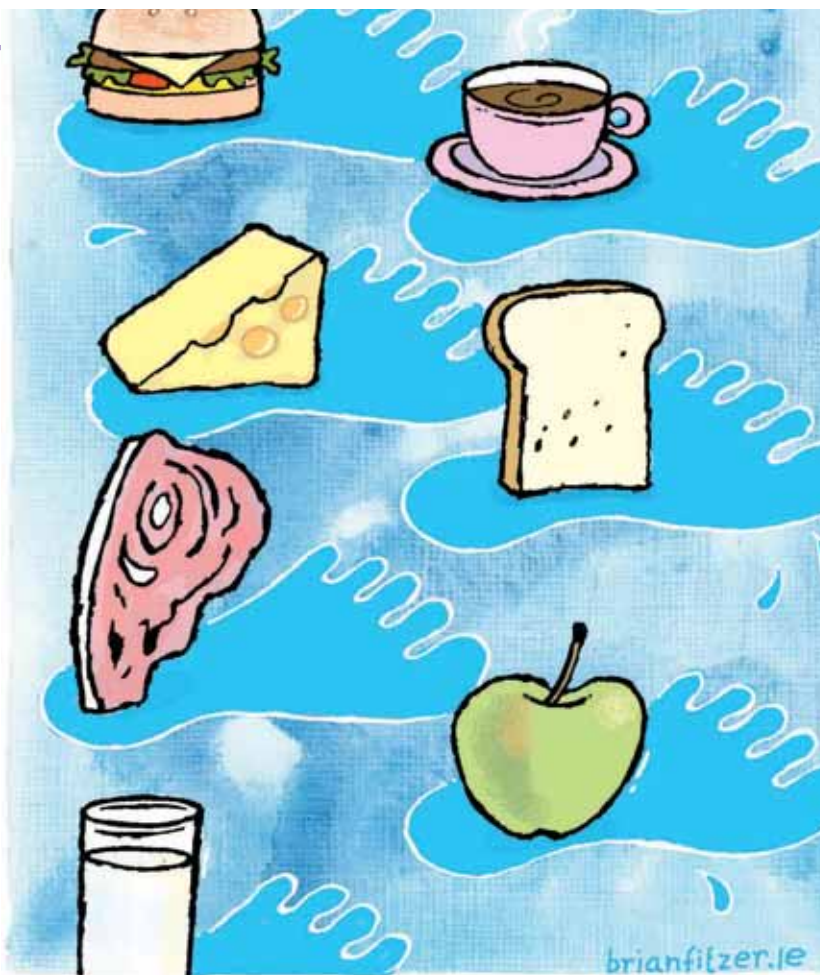
Water footprint

Did you know it takes 140 litres of water to produce your morning cup of coffee and 16,000 litres to produce one kilo of beef? We've all heard of carbon footprints, but now environmental experts are telling us to watch out for our water footprints as well. They estimate that, at current levels of usage, two-thirds of the world's population will live in areas of water shortage by 2025.

While many of us try to conserve water by not leaving taps running or by collecting rainwater for use in the garden, the concept of the water footprint is broader than this. Research has shown that less than 10% of a person's – or a nation's – water use is for drinking or domestic purposes. The rest – more than 90% – goes on food production.

Your personal water footprint depends on the goods and services you use and can be calculated on the waterfootprint.org website. The results may come as a shock: even those items that we consume without thinking about it take huge amounts of water to produce. For example, a simple apple has a footprint of 70 litres, while a slice of white bread takes about 40 litres. A kilo of cheese takes 5,000 litres, a hamburger about 2,400 litres and a glass of milk about 1,760 litres. And it's not just food – a basic cotton shirt has a water footprint of about 2,700 litres.

The CAI thinks it's about time some of this information was included on product labelling, so that consumers can make informed choices about the environmental impact of their purchases.



A step in the right direction

Rapex, the EU rapid alert system for dangerous consumer products, recently published its 2007 report. News from the field of product safety was good: the report highlighted the increasing levels of cooperation between Member States in identifying and banning dangerous products. Notifications of unsafe products have increased by about 53% in the last year, with over 1,600 reports made in the EU in 2007. This seems to indicate that authorities are becoming more vigilant and that controls on unsafe products are getting stricter. Irish reports are also on the rise – our 32 Rapex notifications in 2007 represented an increase of more than 100% on 2006, and included items such as motor vehicles, toys, electrical items, household goods and cosmetics.

However, we still have a long way to go when it comes to

market surveillance: only 6% of notifications received in 2007 related to products available on the Irish market. And as consumer group BEUC points out, "when one knows that given that just one notification can mean millions of products, one wonders how many products actually slip through the net". European product safety laws, particularly as they relate to toys and cosmetics still need to be tightened considerably.

As a consumer, make sure to keep an eye out for recall notices in shops and newspapers, but don't rely on them exclusively to tell you what's safe. Examine your purchases carefully, especially if they are intended for children, and remember to check that toys are age-appropriate. If you come across an unsafe product, inform the CAI and notify the NCA on 1850 432 432.



Health service satisfaction

Can consumer satisfaction with health services really be measured on an aggregate level?

Useful websites

Health Service Executive
www.hse.ie

Health Consumer
Powerhouse
www.
healthpowerhouse.com

Insight 07 is a HSE survey of consumer satisfaction with health and social services. It measured satisfaction based on ratings for the quality of care, waiting times, cleanliness of facilities, experience of encounter with, and confidence in health professionals. The survey findings were positive overall.

Perception and use

Insight 07 suggests there are differences between public perception of health services and the satisfaction of users. Public perception can be affected by media reporting. The survey was not focused on a particular group or setting; it is an overall evaluation. Of the consumers surveyed, 27% had not used any service, 64% had consulted their GP and only 30% had had some form of hospital experience. With this balance of health service use, it is questionable whether this can act as an overall evaluation of consumer satisfaction with health and social services.

AT A GLANCE

Perception.

Satisfaction.

HSE.

Report by

Aisling Murtagh 

Euro Health Index

In the 2007 Euro Health Consumer Index, Ireland ranked 16th out of the 29 countries surveyed. This index measures health services in terms of performance and not consumer satisfaction. The findings were poor in relation to waiting times and intermediary in relation to

patient outcomes, patient rights and information and generosity of public healthcare systems.

Is satisfaction the correct measure?

The results of consumer satisfaction surveys are mostly positive. Research in the journal *Social Science and Medicine* has questioned the validity of satisfaction as a measure of the quality of public sector services. Rather than leading to improvements, it can lead to an endorsement of the status quo. The conclusion drawn by the HSE is that the health service is getting it right for most of the people, most of the time. This conclusion does seem like an endorsement of the status quo.

Getting it wrong

Insight 07 found that 78% of consumers surveyed thought ward facilities were generally clean. However, hygiene in hospitals has been shown to be less than satisfactory. The 2007 Health Information and Quality Authority review of hygiene standards in public hospitals found the majority of public hospitals to have fair hygiene standards. Nine hospitals were rated poor and none received the highest rating of very good. Healthcare associated infections have increased in recent years. Good hygiene is fundamental to reducing the incidence of such infections, and should be straightforward to achieve. From this example, measuring satisfaction does not reflect adequate service.

choice comment

The HSE accepts that there are individual cases where services are not at the standard they wish. But they also suggest it is unfair that this is presented as a representation of the entire health service. It is hard for consumers who are, to say the least, dissatisfied with the health service to accept the statement that the health service gets it right for most people most of the time. Rather than highlighting where the HSE gets it right (and even this is questionable), a better approach might be to focus on correcting where they get it wrong. Health service mistakes can potentially have devastating effects for consumers and their families. We have suffered poor quality standards for long enough. If those charged with the duty of providing a quality service cannot achieve it – then move aside and let those who can take charge!

Writing the situation

Unwanted faxes

As an enthusiastic subscriber to your magazine for some years now, I wonder if you could help me (and others) with a particular problem.

Particularly over the last few months, I have been receiving a growing number of unrequited faxes through my fax machine – usually offering holidays but other services as well. Up to 5 or 6 faxes might be received in a single day.

Apart from the nuisance value, my paper and ink are being used up without my permission and I suppose it is this which is particularly annoying. And my rubbish disposal bill increases. Is it legal for companies to send such unrequited faxes? There is usually – but not always – a 4800 number to ring to unsubscribe or a fax back number; but this is just an extra unnecessary burden on the fax owner.

Whilst this is not a problem of world shattering magnitude, it is a daily low level niggle for me and, I am sure, for many people and businesses in the country. Can *Consumer Choice* do anything about this problem by highlighting it? I certainly will not put business in the way of anyone who sends such faxes.

Looking forward to any ideas you might have on the matter.

S. Carroll
Co. Dublin

See our report on direct marketing (p209) for information and advice on this issue.

Euro or Sterling?

I would welcome your advice on the following. My daughter purchased a toy for her baby in Mothercare, Tallaght recently. You will see from the paper attached that the price clearly states 49.99 which she automatically assumed was euros. However, when she went to pay for it they stated that that was the sterling price and she was charged €69 for this toy.

I would have thought that a shop was obliged to show the price in

euros or at least have a sign to indicate in which currency it is.

Perhaps you would let me know if she was obliged to pay this higher price in the circumstances. I have the box this toy was purchased in and it shows no other price on it apart from the 49.99.

I. Franey
Dublin 16

Irish retailers must give prices in euro, although they may also include other currencies. Unclear pricing does not entitle you to the product at the lower price, as a price tag does not constitute part of a binding contract. Sorry! However, such misleading pricing at this should be reported to the NCA on 1890 432 432.

Newspaper prices

The Irish Independent is priced at €1.80 in Rep. of Ireland and at 75p in Northern Ireland. A difference of 80c approx. Similar differences apply with The Irish Times and Examiner. What is more, in the last three price increases of the Irish Independent, of 10c each, there has been no increase in this price in Northern Ireland. To add fuel to this the Euro has greatly appreciated against sterling where therefore you would expect the opposite to happen as regards on increase – but no.

I am paying up to €290 (Yes, two hundred and ninety euros per annum) more for a daily Independent read compared to the same product in Northern Ireland.

L. Broderick
Dublin 22

Although it seems unfair, retailers may set prices as they wish, and need not maintain standard prices in different countries or currencies. Hence the constant advice to 'shop around' before making a purchase.

Medicine prices

As a pharmacist member of the Consumers' Association I had a double interest in your recent interview on Highland Radio with my colleague Tom Murray. I was pleased that you acknowledged that the position of rural pharmacies serving a large GMS (medical card) population is different from that of larger pharmacies in more affluent areas.

I think it is important to point out that although the HSE has repeatedly stated that its proposals will reduce prices to all consumers of medicines this is not the case. When last year the manufacturers of drugs reduced the prices of some medicines under the

IPHA agreement, pharmacists passed these reductions on to their private patients. However, reductions were not passed on to DPS patients, most of whom still had to pay €85 unless the price of their prescription dropped below this threshold. These patients were further penalised when the co-payment was raised to €90 in January. The HSE also gets a rebate on all drugs they pay for. This is not available to private patients and is not passed on to DPS patients.

If the HSE's cuts are implemented the vast majority of these patients will still be paying €90. If the HSE wants to reduce the burden on the chronically ill it should simply reduce the level of the co-payment. It is another of the many stealth taxes we pay in this country and like the bed charges in public hospitals is simply a tax on sickness.

M. O'Doherty
Co. Donegal

Phone problems

I am writing to you regarding my telephone account with Talk Talk. Before Easter this year I had problems with my land line. I phoned Talk Talk to complain, but received no satisfaction. On Easter Sunday night as I was cooking dinner an intruder came over my gate, banging on doors and windows. I got my telephone to ring the Guards only to realise the land line was dead. I was hostage in my own house for an hour and a half until my friends came, all because I did not have my phone working.

It is now May and the land line is still not repaired. I phoned Talk Talk to tell them to take out the phone. I did not want it any more as I did not receive proper service. I have phone bills for April and May but I only paid for the calls I made. I told Talk Talk I was not paying line rental because I did not have a satisfactory service. I have spoken to them again regarding the land line, and they said it would take 10 days to take it out.

Am I justified in my action? Should I or should I not pay line rental?

C. Phelan
Dublin 7

Whenever you sign up for a service, you enter a contract with the supplier. If the supplier does not fulfil its end of the bargain, you do not have to fulfil yours, and may therefore withhold payment. However, you should inform them in writing that you are doing so, setting out your complaint and explaining your reasons in detail.

The letters page is your page. It is your chance to share your gripes, grievances, queries or experiences as a consumer with other *Consumer Choice* readers. Our address is printed on the inside front cover (also email cai@consumerassociation.ie).

Your letters These should include your daytime telephone number and, if known, membership number (from your magazine label). In some cases, we may use an extract, rather than the whole of your letter.

No letter is published anonymously. If you do not want your letter published, please mark it 'Not for publication'.

Gemma Crilly



Almost every consumer in the country now has a mobile phone. But do you know your rights when problems arise?

Seeing red

I recently bought a mobile phone. The label on the box said it was red, but it turned out to be blue. Can I return it even though it works?

Phone companies have several rules dictating when a consumer can claim a refund, repair, or a new phone. Here is a comparison of the leading providers regarding phone returns, as taken from company websites:

Vodafone

- Within 14 days: full refund for any reason if unused
- Within 28 days: replacement or full refund if faulty
- After 28 days: free repair if fault develops under warranty

O2

- Within 7 days: full refund for any reason if unused
- Within 30 days: full refund if the phone is faulty
- After 30 days: free replacement if covered by warranty

Meteor

- Within 14 days: full refund for coverage related issues
- Within 28 days: replacement for manufacturing problems
- After 28 days: free repair if fault develops under warranty

3 Ireland

- Within 14 days: money back guarantee if dissatisfied
- After 14 days: all mobiles include a 12 month warranty; if fault develops a replacement will be sent within 24 hours

Regardless of company policy, Irish law requires all purchased goods to be of merchantable quality, fit for their purpose, and as advertised. The label stated the incorrect colour; therefore this product was not as advertised and you have the right to a refund, repair, or replacement.

Rules and regulations

I'd like to switch my mobile from prepay to contract, but am unsure what to look out for in the contract.

The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) states that all mobile phone contracts must include:

- Identity and address of the supplier
- Services provided and quality levels offered
- Time for initial connection
- Maintenance services offered
- Particulars of prices and tariffs and means by which current applicable tariffs and maintenance charges may be obtained
- Duration of the contract, conditions for renewal and termination of services and of the contract
- Any compensation and refund arrangements applicable if contracted service quality levels aren't met

This is standard information that must be supplied when signing up with a phone company. If anything is missing, don't sign until the relevant information is added into the paperwork. This ensures you have all necessary information to guarantee you receive the services paid for.

Customer service

I called my phone company's customer service department multiple times to resolve a problem, and they have yet to act. What are my rights?

According to ComReg, customer service operators should take all possible steps to ensure that complaints and problems are resolved as quickly as possible. It suggests that operators include the following in their Codes of Practice:

- First point of contact for complainant
- Means of recording complaints
- A time frame within which the operator will respond to complaints
- Retention of consumer complaint records

If you feel your complaints aren't carefully handled, we suggest you contact ComReg (see *Useful contact*). Its consumer team facilitates consumer queries and complaints and aims to ensure all operators comply with its code of practice.

Useful contact

Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg)
1890 229 668
www.askcomreg.ie

Report by Justin Paulsen