**Project Title:** Knowledge and predictors of fish oil supplement use in Northern Irish adults

**Supervisors:** Dr Liz Simpson, Professor Jacqueline McCormack Contact Details: eea.simpson@ulster.ac.uk; jm.mccormack@ulster.ac.uk

**Level:** PhD

**Background to the project:**

Omega 3 polyunsaturated fatty acids are found in natural fish oils. These are rich in eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). EPA is found in large concentrations in the brain and is thought to be essential for brain development and normal functioning (Stoll, 2001), it may enhance neurotransmission and play a crucial role in psychological well-being (Stoll, 2001; Lombard, 2000). There are numerous health benefits associated with fish consumption (Burger & Gochfeld, 2009), but very little research looking at why people take fish supplements or what predicts their use. This is an important research issue to improve uptake in those populations who could most benefit from their use (Calder et al., 2011).

There have been studies that have examined consumer attitudes towards the use of dietary supplements but little research that has specifically examined factors predicting the use of fish oil supplements. Supplement use is associated with a variety of demographic and lifestyle factors including age, sex and ethnicity, perceived benefits and educational status (Conner et al., 2003). The most common demographic predictors are women that are white with higher educational status (Braun & Venter, 2008). Dietary supplement use is frequently associated with those who do not comply with the target group i.e. individuals who already have a healthy lifestyle are more likely to use dietary supplements (Kirk et al. 1999).

The aims of this study are to establish factors influencing fish oil supplement use; to examine the difference in attitudes and knowledge between users and non-users of fish oil supplements and to determine predictors of fish oil supplement use. The study will focus on aspects such as demographic and lifestyle factors as well as attitudinal factors believed to influence or discourage supplement use.

**Methods to be used:**

A mixed methods approach will be utilised to gather data, focus groups and questionnaire based studies and will aim to determine consumer (and potential consumer) knowledge of aspects of the action of fish oil supplements and their potential benefits as well as to elucidate which factors might predict fish oil supplement use. This will be an inter-disciplinary research project involving the Psychology Research Institute and the Northern Ireland Centre for Food and Health (NICHE).

**Objectives of the research:**

- To determine perceptions and knowledge of the health benefits of taking fish oils in an adult sample.
In a comparison of users and non-users of fish oil supplements, trying to determine what predicts its use.

To develop recommendations and strategies for promoting fish oil use in specific populations (e.g. pregnant mothers) who may benefit most from its use.

Skills required of applicant:

- Ability to perform scientific literature searches
- Good communication skills
- Good report writing skills
- Ability to work independently and as part of a team
- Experience of databases and SPSS
- Experience of carrying out research projects
- Experience of working with older adults would be preferred but not essential

References:


