Food information to consumers - Commission proposal

The European Heart Network’s position in a nutshell
Summary

On 30 January 2008 the European Commission published its proposal for a Regulation on the provision of food information to consumers. The proposal covers general information as well as nutrition information.

The European Heart Network (EHN) welcomes the fact that, for the first time, mandatory nutrition declarations are proposed in EU legislation. EHN notes that clear and easily understood nutrition labelling is a crucial element in a strategy to address the massive nutrition-related health problems in Europe such as cardiovascular diseases and obesity.

EHN recognises that the Commission proposal has gone some way to meet health organisations’ demand for a simplified front of pack nutrition labelling scheme. However, EHN feels that the nutrition labelling requirements need to be more comprehensive. They should consist of a simplified front of pack labelling for four key nutrients of high relevance to public health allowing people to assess at-a-glance whether a food product contains a high, low or medium level of these nutrients. Consumer research in the UK and elsewhere shows that colour coding is probably the best way to provide this quick understanding. For the discerning consumer and people with special needs, back of pack labelling must also be provided and it should include information on energy, protein, carbohydrates, sugars, fibre, fat, saturated fats, trans fats and salt.

EHN believes that the regulation on food and nutrition labelling should be adopted as a matter of urgency.

EHN’s position in a nutshell

- Both front of pack and back of pack nutrition labelling must be mandatory.
- Back of pack labelling should contain information on energy, protein, carbohydrates, sugars, fibre, fat, saturated fats, trans fats and salt per 100g/100ml
- Front of pack should serve as a ‘signposting’ guiding consumers at-a-glance towards healthier choices, that is why front of pack should not have more than four key elements: energy, saturated fat, sugars and salt
- Multiple colour coding should be mandatory on front of pack, with red, yellow (amber) and green indicating high, medium and low levels of energy and the three nutrients indicated above
- %GDAs may accompany colour coding on front of pack. %GDAs on their own do not allow a quick understanding of whether the nutrient is present at a low, medium or high level. Research shows that people like and understand colour coding whereas %GDAs are not as easily understood
- Reference intakes in Annex XI should be reviewed
- All food labelling must be legible. EHN agrees with the Commission’s proposal that the label must be of a font size of at least 3mm and ensure significant contrast between print and background
Information and background

European Heart Network

The European Heart Network (EHN) is a Brussels-based alliance of heart foundations and other concerned non-governmental organisations throughout Europe. EHN has 31 member organisations in 26 countries.

The European Heart Network plays a leading role in the prevention and reduction of cardiovascular disease – in particular coronary heart disease (CHD) and stroke - through advocacy, networking and education so that it is no longer a major cause of premature death and disability throughout Europe.

Cardiovascular diseases and nutrition

- Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the number one cause of death in Europe. It accounts for more than 2 million deaths each year in the European Union

- Cardiovascular disease is estimated to cost the EU economy over €192 billion a year. €110 billion are for health care costs (57%) and €82 billion are indirect costs due to lost productivity (21%) and for informal care (22%)

- It has been estimated that unhealthy diets are responsible for about a third of CVD

- WHO estimates that modest population-wide and simultaneous reductions in blood pressure, obesity, cholesterol and tobacco use would more than halve CVD incidence

It is essential that Europe – at all levels – adopts and implements a food and nutrition strategy aiming at addressing effectively the burden of chronic diseases in Europe.

The most important population dietary goals to prevent cardiovascular diseases are for:

- Saturated fats and trans fats
- Fruit and vegetables
- Salt
- Body Mass Index (BMI)

- Saturated fats and trans fats
  - High intakes of saturated fat and trans fats raise cholesterol levels and significantly increase the risk of CVD
  - Population goal: an average intake of saturated fats and trans fats should be less than 10% of energy; intake from transfats should be less than 1% of energy

Decreasing **saturated** and increasing polyunsaturated fat can lead to at a decrease of up to:

14% in total cholesterol – and 44% in the risk of heart disease²

Increasing **trans fatty acids** can lead up to a:

28% increase in the risk of heart disease³

- **Fruit and vegetables**
  - Fruit and vegetables contain a vast array of beneficial compounds which acting together are responsible for their protective effects against a range of chronic diseases including notably cardiovascular diseases
  - Population goal: an average intake of more than 400g/day (five servings)

If every person in the EU(25) consumed 400 g of fruit and vegetables per day, 50 000 deaths per year could be prevented. This represents 41 000 deaths from CHD (7%) and 9 500 deaths from stroke (4%).

If every person in the EU(25) consumed 600g of fruit and vegetables per day, which is what is the average intake in some EU countries, more than 135 000 deaths/year from CHD and stroke could be prevented⁴

- **Salt**
  - Reducing salt intakes lower blood pressure and risk of CVD in people with normal blood pressure as well as in people with hypertension
  - Population goal: an average intake of less than 5g/day⁵

Reducing salt intake by 3g/day can lead to a 16% decrease in cardiovascular deaths⁶

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• **Body mass index**
  
  o Overweight and obesity can be prevented by the adoption of healthier diets and an increase in physical activity.
  
  o Overweight and obesity are partly related to the over-consumption of energy dense foods – e.g. foods high in sugar and fat
  
  o Population goals:
    - An average BMI of 23
    - An average intake of less than 10% of energy from added sugar
    - An average intake of less than 30% of energy from fat

| Overweight and obesity increase the risk of CVD, diabetes mellitus, certain cancers, arthritis and breathing problems. An increased risk of non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) is perhaps the most serious consequence of being overweight in terms of raising CVD risk. At least 80% of new cases of NIDDM can be attributed to excess weight gain |

EHN welcomes the EU strategy on nutrition aiming at addressing diet-related ill health, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, cancers and diabetes. Food and nutrition labelling is a crucial element of a food and nutrition strategy. Nutrition labelling is an intrinsic part of educating people about what a healthy balanced diet looks like and what foods contribute to it.

**For more information, please contact**

Susanne Logstrup, Director
slogstrup@ehnheart.org
or
Marleen Kestens, Network Coordinator
mkestens@ehnheart.org

European heart Network
Rue Montoyer 31
1030 Brussels

Tel +32 2 512 91 74
Fax +32 2 503 35 25

Email: info@ehnheart.org
www.ehnheart.org

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