

New nutrition guidelines for Europe, halfway there...

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On request from the European Commission, the European Food Safety Authority has provided guidance on intakes of fats, carbohydrates, fibre and water considering the new evidence. These dietary reference values establish optimum intakes of nutrients in a balanced diet which when part of an overall healthy lifestyle, contribute to good health.

Update in progress

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is currently updating the dietary reference values (DRVs) published in 1993. This will provide comprehensive nutrition guidelines, for example for food labelling and for setting public health targets in Europe. After extensive consultation with Member States, the scientific community and other stakeholders, DRVs for fats, carbohydrates, dietary fibre and water have been published.² Those for energy, protein, vitamins and minerals are still in the pipeline.

Chronic disease considered

In the past, recommended daily intake values were aimed primarily at preventing specific nutrient deficiencies. In recent decades it has become clear that the nutrient makeup of the diet has a profound impact on the development of chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and heart disease, and therefore on long-term health. This is why DRVs now include recommendations on intakes for nutrients like carbohydrates, fibre and fats.

Carbohydrate range

Moving away from specific values, EFSA has instead given an acceptable range of carbohydrate intake (sugars and starchy carbohydrates combined), known as a reference intake range. Diets containing between 45-60% of daily energy from carbohydrates, combined with reduced fat and saturated fat intake, improve metabolic risk factors for chronic disease. No specific intake or upper limit for intake of total sugars or added sugars is set as available evidence was found insufficient to link high sugar intakes with weight gain, micronutrient deficiencies or tooth decay. Appropriate oral hygiene measures with fluoridated toothpaste contribute to caries prevention.

Fibre threshold

The recommendation for fibre intake has been based upon the amount needed to keep the bowels functioning correctly. This acceptable intake is 25g per day. However, there is evidence that consuming fibre-rich foods such as wholegrain cereals, fruits and vegetables, providing more than 25g of fibre per day, aids weight control and reduces the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. It is recommended that this is taken into consideration when setting food based targets.

Fat range

The EFSA also decided to set a reference intake range for fat of between 20 and 35% of total daily energy intake. Within this range, based on observations of dietary intakes, no overt nutritional deficiencies or adverse effects on blood fats or body weight have been observed. It is also pointed out that higher fat intakes can still be compatible with both good health and normal body weight, depending on the type of foods eaten and physical activity levels. Saturated fats should be kept as low as possible within the context of a nutritionally adequate diet as well as trans fats, which are not required by the body. No specific levels of mono- and polyunsaturated fats are given except that they should replace saturated fats where possible. The omega-3 long chain fatty acids, found in oily fish, are of specific benefit to heart health and an adequate intake of 250mg per day was set. As little as a mean daily intake of 20 grams of salmon would provide this quantity.

Water

Sufficient water is vital for practically all functions of the body and in particular for regulating body temperature. A loss of 10% of body water can be fatal. Water intakes vary; the more physical activity and the hotter the environment, the more fluid is needed. EFSA set an adequate intake, assuming moderate activity and external temperature, of 2 litres per day for women and 2.5 litres per day for men. This includes water from all drinks and from food.

Food-based advice

To be of help to consumers, the DRVs need to be translated into useful advice about what foods to eat, and in what quantities and proportions. Such food-based dietary guidelines need to take into account cultural differences in food intake in a region or country, be practical to implement, and provide straightforward advice about dietary patterns that will maintain good health and prevent diet-related diseases. Uncertainties still exist on deciding what are optimum dietary intakes of carbohydrates (especially sugar), fibre and fats. Therefore, we can expect changes to these guidelines in the future as better evidence of the relationship between diet and health develops.

References

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