

ANNEX I: SATURATED FAT

EU FRAMEWORK FOR NATIONAL INITIATIVES ON SELECTED NUTRIENTS

On 3 February 2011 the High Level Group (HLG) agreed on the EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients. The HLG members asked the Commission services to develop concrete benchmarks and major food categories to focus action on for this new framework in a similar way as for the salt reduction initiative of the EU. Based on the results of an expert meeting on 29 September 2011 and the discussions in the HLG in 2011 and 2012, a proposal for an annex to the EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients was developed.

Diets vary between Member States leading to different national priorities and plans. This annex focuses on saturated fat as this was the nutrient on which the majority of Member States are working in national plans. Annex I complements the general EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients by setting detailed benchmarks and major food categories to focus action at EU level. Member States may focus their initiatives also on other target nutrients, food categories and strategies to bring intakes in line with recommended levels to fit national specificities.

Why an annex for saturated fat?

The overall goal of Annex I of the EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients on saturated fat is to contribute towards achieving population intake levels and dietary patterns in line with the national, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations. According to EFSA¹, the intake of saturated fat is recommended to be as low as possible within the context of a nutritionally adequate diet. Diets high in saturated fat are associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases². Data from Member States bring to light that the current average intake levels for saturated fat are clearly exceeding WHO recommendations of less than 10 % of the energy intake, in nearly all Member States.

Benchmarks and major food categories to focus action on

It is suggested that priority is given to food categories that commonly represent major sources of saturated fat in European diets. According to national plans of Member States, the relevant food categories where Member States are focussing these efforts on are: school meals, ready meals, dairy and cheese products, meat products, and fats, oils and margarines. The next most frequently referred to categories are: meals served in modern restaurants and breakfast cereals. At Member State level, the approach taken to lead to a reduced consumption of saturated fat may differ by product category. For different food categories different benchmarks may be set.

For this effort to be meaningful, the reduction of the saturated fat content should not lead to an increase in the absolute amount of trans fat, sugars, salt³ or the caloric content of a product.

¹ EFSA (2010). Opinion on Dietary Reference Values for fats, including saturated fatty acids, polyunsaturated fatty acids, monounsaturated fatty acids, trans fatty acids, and cholesterol. EFSA Journal 2010; 8(3):1461. [107 pp.]

² EFSA (2010). Opinion on establishing Food-Based Dietary Guidelines. EFSA Journal 2010; 8(3):1460 [42 pp.]

³ The nutrient that should be reduced is sodium. The High Level Group decided to communicate about 'salt' and not 'sodium', as this is also better understood by the public. This is why this annex refers to the term 'salt'.

Regarding saturated fat, it can be difficult to establish absolute target levels, e.g. in grams, for certain food categories at European level, as starting points may differ considerably from one Member State to another and time required to reach a certain level may also vary considerably.

On the basis of experience of saturated fat reductions in Member States that have national plans, it is proposed to set a general benchmark for saturated fat reduction of a minimum of 5 % in 4 years and a minimum of an additional 5 % reduction by 2020 against the individual baseline levels at the end of 2012.

Special arrangements for individual categories

Regarding dairy products, reduction of the saturated fat content can be achieved by reducing the total fat content. Lower fat options have already been developed. The aim is to promote these low fat options, which should be at least not more sweetened or salted than the alternative, higher-fat options. The 'low fat option' for products such as drinking milk and fermented milk products refers to a fat content at or below 1.5 %. In order to promote low fat options, governments may work together with stakeholders on raising public awareness and encourage industry to promote these products with all available means. Food business operators are encouraged to aim for enhanced availability and therefore increased choice of low fat options for dairy products. On the basis of national plans a benchmark to be reached by 2020 can be eventually set.

Regarding meat products, reduction of the saturated fat content can be achieved by reducing the total fat content. Lower fat options have already been developed. Food business operators are encouraged to increase the availability and therefore increased choice of low fat options for meat products. These low fat options should be at least not more salted than the alternative, higher-fat options.

Lowest levels possible

At least in the food category ready meals, fats, oils and margarines, food items served in modern restaurants and breakfast cereals the lowest levels possible ('best in class' levels) of saturated fat content and for meat products the lowest possible levels ('best in class' levels) of total fat content are identified at EU level. Also, Member States may identify 'best in class' products within other food categories. Food producers are encouraged to move towards those 'best in class' levels for all categories of food. If reductions reach the current 'best in class' this is considered as sufficient progress. However, exceeding the benchmarks or improving the 'best in class' levels is strongly encouraged.

Product priorities

Following the example of the EU Framework for National Salt Initiatives, in order to maximise the impact of reformulation, food business operators would prioritise the products with the largest market share. Furthermore, care should be taken that reductions are delivered across the full range of food products from premium to economy items so that all population groups can benefit.

Raising public awareness

Raising public awareness is central in order to reduce population intake levels of saturated fat towards recommended levels. This covers not only awareness about saturated fat and its relation to health, but also awareness of an overall healthy eating pattern and behaviour. Furthermore, raising awareness about healthier options within product categories that are present on the market already and promoting their consumption is crucial. The Commission will assist Member States in their efforts to raise awareness and will seek synergies with the EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.