

EU FRAMEWORK FOR NATIONAL INITIATIVES ON SELECTED NUTRIENTS

By selected nutrients the framework refers to a complex set of target variables that may vary nationally, such as saturated fat, trans fat¹, energy, total fat content, added sugars, portion sizes and consumption frequency. Member States initiatives may cover one or a combination of these elements.

Background

The Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues, adopted in May 2007, identified possible areas for action and collaboration. Some Member States are encouraging reformulation of foods, for example in terms of their levels of fat, saturated and trans fats, salt and sugars. The Strategy sets out the Commission's intention to facilitate, in a partnership context, the roll out of campaigns aimed at improving the nutrient content of manufactured foods in the EU. Salt is dealt with in a framework adopted in 2008.

At the High Level Group (HLG) meeting of 2 April 2009, several Member States expressed their interest to work together on actions to reduce consumption of fats and sugars. The HLG members asked the Commission services to help them building a similar framework as for salt reduction in the EU. Based on the results of 2 expert meetings on 10 November 2009 and 10 November 2010 on reformulation of nutrients other than salt and the discussions in the High Level Group in 2009 and 2010, a proposal for a possible EU Framework for National Initiatives on Fats and Energy was developed describing a common vision for a general European approach towards working on population intakes of the selected nutrients allowing for relevant specificities to be taken into account.

Why a European framework?

The overall goal of the EU framework on fats and energy is to contribute towards achieving population intake levels and dietary patterns in line with the national, the European Food Safety Authority and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations. Participation of Member States in this common framework is entirely voluntary. Participating countries can work within the framework as a large group towards a common goal. The proposed framework should support and reinforce national plans, as it will enable comparison of progress across the EU while maintaining flexibility for Member States to shape their national approaches to reduce the consumption of nutrients of national concern in accordance with national dietary advice and food-based dietary guidance. The framework will allow the Member States and, as appropriate, the Commission and interested stakeholders to give coordinated messages for reformulation and changing portion sizes offered of food products to the industry across the European Union and help to generate momentum and measurable action. Moreover, it will allow all players as identified in the EU Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related health issues to take stock of their progress at the end of the Strategy's period as to objectives set and progress achieved. Actions resulting from this framework must not lead to increased salt levels in foods thus compromising the EU framework for

¹ 'trans fat' means fatty acids with at least one non-conjugated (namely interrupted by at least one methylene group) carbon-carbon double bond in the trans configuration;

national salt initiatives as agreed by Health Ministers in the Council Conclusions of 8 June 2010 Action to reduce population salt intake for better health.

Target variables

Strategies for reducing the consumption of certain nutrients should be targeted for those where there is evidence of excess consumption in European populations that might influence diet-related conditions and diseases. There is evidence of the potential benefit for public health in the EU to support focusing actions on improving the nutritional quality of the fat content. According to EFSA², a high intake of saturated fat and in particular trans fat is among the factors increasing the risk to develop certain chronic diseases. With regard to total energy intake, excessive intake in comparison to the energy expenditure leads to high rates of overweight and obesity in Member States, which are then associated with increased risk to develop certain chronic diseases. There is evidence to support the focus of future actions on decreasing energy density because of the association of high energy density diets with increased risk of weight gain³. This may be partly achieved by decreasing total fat content, by reducing the energy density and increasing the nutrient density in food products, by reducing consumption of sugars-sweetened beverages, and / or by reducing portion sizes and consumption frequency of energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods that are consumed in amounts above national guidelines.

As diets vary between Member States, therefore the focus will be on the nutrients and food groups that most Member States prioritise according to their national situations. Moreover, as this is voluntary action and must take into account national specificities, Member States are given flexibility in adding or limiting target nutrients, food categories and strategies to bring intakes in line with recommended levels in order to fit national situations.

General Principles

The framework builds on five key elements as simultaneous and interconnected strands of action explained below, as well as, where possible, on common shared minimum benchmarks. Engagement with stakeholders at European and national levels is encouraged and is seen as essential for success. In order to maximise the impact of reformulation and changing portion sizes offered, food manufacturers are asked to 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.

1) Data: Member States investigate the national data available on consumption of energy and nutrients of national concern. Furthermore, current levels of those nutrients in foods, and food groups that are the major contributors of the national diet should be evaluated. Member States decide which data needs to be collected in order to fill the gaps.

2) Benchmarks & major food categories to focus action on: It is suggested that priority is given to food categories that commonly represent major sources of the nutrients of concern in average

² EFSA (European Food Safety Authority) (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.

³ EFSA (European Food Safety Authority) (2008). Opinion relating to the setting of nutrient profiles for foods bearing nutrition and health claims pursuant to article 4 of the regulation (EC) ° No 1924/2006. EFSA Journal 644, 1-44

diets. At Member State level, the approach taken to lead to a reduced consumption of the nutrients of concern differs for the different product categories.

3) Reformulation and changing portion sizes offered: Member States will strive to achieve a broad endorsement of the common vision on reduction of nutrients of concern or of portion sizes with food stakeholders and their local federations. The Commission will facilitate discussions with the European umbrella associations at the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health and multinational companies, supporting similar discussions that take place in parallel in a number of Member States at national level.

4) Raising public awareness: Raising public awareness is central in many activities described in this framework. This covers not only awareness about nutrients and their relation to health, but also awareness of an overall healthy eating pattern and behaviour that focuses on suggested portion sizes and consumption frequency of certain food categories. Raising public awareness is best dealt with at national level and is therefore within the responsibility of each Member State.

5) Monitoring & evaluation: Activities on reformulation, modification of portion sizes and on raising public awareness as well as actual intake of nutrients of concern for the population need to be monitored. Monitoring is best dealt with at national level and is therefore the responsibility of each Member State. On the EU level monitoring and evaluation of the framework initiatives as a part of the Nutrition Strategy is performed in cooperation with WHO.

Timeframe

Based on the experience with the Salt framework the desired aim would be for Member States to achieve by 2013: broad endorsement of this vision by economic operators or representing federations, have a monitoring approach in place, implement in parallel initiatives to raise public awareness and submit a first progress and monitoring report to the Commission so that progress can be endorsed in the result of the EU Strategy on Nutrition.