



fighting heart disease
and stroke

european heart network

EHN feedback to the Commission Consultation on EU farm and food products – review of policy on promotion inside and outside the EU

8 March 2021

Cardiovascular disease remains the main killer in Europe and in the EU.

In the EU, unhealthy diets are associated with over 800 000 deaths from CVD each year, accounting for over 40% of all CVD deaths – 417 000 in men and almost 400 000 in women. Dietary risks are responsible for almost 45% of all the years lost to CVD death or disability in the EU. In view of the evolution of European Union (EU) policies in the areas of food systems and public health, following especially the adoption of the Farm to Fork Strategy, the EU policy for the promotion of agricultural products is no longer fit for public health purposes and requires a fundamental revision.

The scientific evidence base for recommending a cardiovascular health-promoting diet has strengthened in the last six years. A cardiovascular health-promoting diet means a shift from an animal-based diet to a more plant-based diet. It includes vegetables, fruit and berries in abundance. Whole grain products, nuts and seeds, fish, pulses, low-fat dairy products are also important, as are non-tropical vegetable oils in modest amounts. This everyday dietary pattern also limits consumption of red meat, processed meat products and foods or drinks with low content of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre and/or a high content of free sugars, saturated/trans fats or salt.

The CAP is not in line with this recommendation and a radical rethinking of the CAP is necessary to enable positive dietary changes. Trade and investment agreements can impact on the food environment and there is a need to take nutrition into account in trade negotiations.

Current approaches to restricting marketing of unhealthy foods to children are inadequate and decisive policy action for health protection and promotion among children and adolescents is highly desirable..

Promoting Health-environment win-wins between different sectors through for example dietary guidelines and broader policy approaches are also required. The main pillars of a healthy diet are spelled-out in food-based dietary guidelines, available in all EU Member States. Bringing food demand closer to existing guidelines will not only improve people's health and cut healthcare costs but will also reduce environmental impacts.

Current food environments across Europe exploit individuals' biological, psychological, social, and economic vulnerabilities, making them more likely to consume unhealthy foods

and impacting on cardiovascular health. Commercial food promotion is one environmental characteristic driving consumption of foods high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS). Food marketing practices contribute heavily to the current food environment, which tends to stimulate behaviour causing obesity. Yet, the purpose of public health nutrition policies should be to create food environments where the healthy option is the easy, default and most affordable option. Such policies do not restrict or put the burden of change on individuals, but rather empower people to choose in line with common-held aspirations about their own, their children's and the planet's long-term health. Many different types of action will be needed to shift diets towards healthier and more sustainable outcomes.

For a cardiovascular health-promoting diet to become a reality across Europe some major forces that influence food systems need to be addressed. EHN's overarching recommendations are:

- Implement policies to tackle health inequalities in Europe, including equal access to healthy food and environment.
- Ensure that robust mechanisms for nutrition governance are in place and fit-for-purpose.
- Develop an integrated health and environment approach to food systems and promote health-environment win-wins in food-based dietary guidelines.

These overarching recommendations need to be supported with specific recommendations, outlined in the paper [Transforming European food and drink policies for cardiovascular health promotion](#).