

Common statement of representatives of national food safety agencies and institutions involved in nutrition in the European countries and Norway *
13 January 2004

Nutrition has been recognised for a long time as an important component of health maintenance and promotion. Its importance has been recently emphasized by a common resolution of the Health Ministries of the European Union on December 14, 2000, which supported action on nutrition issues in the various areas of European and national policies. The National Food Safety Agencies and institutions involved in nutrition of the European Union countries and Norway hereby acknowledge that nutrition should be considered as a significant parameter in the risk analysis process for food because:

- European countries are facing similar health problems related to nutrition, among which the increasing prevalence of obesity, especially in children, is of particular concern;
- despite food abundance, some surveys performed in the various European countries indicate that health risks exist as a result of insufficient intakes of some indispensable nutrients; particularly relevant for public health actions are current concern around folic acid and salt but the importance of some other nutrients including minerals, vitamins or other specific nutrient should also be considered for certain sectors of the population;
- the development of and increased sale of processed foods, as well as the increase in food eaten outside the home had led to an increase in salt intakes; moreover, salt intake is generally significantly higher than recommended intakes (for example by WHO or some national health authorities);
- concerns about the safety of some foods or food categories can cause modifications in the global dietary patterns of consumers and thus increase nutritional risk (insufficiency or excess of some nutrients);
- the dietary patterns of consumers across the European Union show marked variation driven by cultural diversity and regulatory differences. Globalisation of the food trade has driven the harmonisation of some foods and beverages but not enough to reduce nutritional diversity by any significant degree. Therefore, there are many differences in approaches adopted by national Governments to tackle nutritional issues in their countries. This is in marked contrast to food safety initiatives in the areas of toxicology and microbiology where a degree of harmonisation between Member States has been achieved.

Taking into account all these considerations, the National Food safety Agencies and institutions involved in nutrition of the European Union countries and Norway have reached an agreement on the following points.

Salt

Representatives of national food safety agencies and institutions involved in nutrition of EU countries and Norway recognize that:

- the salt intake is, for most of the countries, an important public health concern and according to scientific evidence should be significantly reduced (for instance targets have been set at an average of 8 g/day in France, 6 g/day in UK, Austria, Germany,

Belgium, Denmark, 5 to 6 g/day in Sweden, 5 g/day in Norway and Greece and 3 to 5 g/day in Finland).

- the reduction of current intakes relies both on raising consumer awareness of the salt and health relationship and on the cooperation of the food and catering industries to reduce the salt content of the food they sell.

The agencies and institutions agree:

- to work together to promote harmonization of European rules for salt labelling especially for a simple way to identify high salt products.
- to also work together to inform consumers on major contributors to daily salt intake particularly breads, meat products, cheese products and processed food;
- there is a need to work with food industries in order to explore possibilities and technical solutions for decreasing salt content in major contributors on a voluntary or, if necessary, on a mandatory basis.

Folic acid

Representatives of national food safety agencies and institutions involved in nutrition of EU countries and Norway recognised :

- the importance of folic acid for the prevention of neural tube defects;
- the fact that women of child bearing age with bad nutritional status are at higher risk;
- that it is difficult too achieve the recommended 400 micrograms of folate through the diet.

This risk can be tackled by 4 approaches :

- promotion of the consumption of food naturally rich in folates
- dietary supplementation
- voluntary fortification of foods
- mandatory fortification of foods

The issue of mandatory fortification was discussed but, at present, beyond promotion of food naturally rich in folic acid and dietary supplementation, voluntary fortification appears to be more relevant in most of the countries in Europe.

They emphasise the following points :

- to increase awareness of the consumers, especially women, of the benefits of increasing their folate status,
- to monitor the health consequences of fortification and follow new scientific knowledge including specifically a possible risk of masking a vitamin B12 deficiency in elderly people,
- to explore as a priority the possibilities for promoting the health benefits of specific sources of folic acid taking account of the future EU health claims regulations.

Obesity and overweight

Representatives of national food safety agencies and institutions involved in nutrition of EU countries and Norway declare that :

- Overweight and obesity are, based on very strong scientific evidence, a critical threat for public health throughout Europe and that strong actions are currently needed to try to reverse the increasing trend in prevalence.

If nothing is done public health, economic and social consequences could be dramatic: It cannot be excluded for instance that the next generation will have a lower life expectancy than their parents;

- This represents an increasing concern in all the countries represented, even if dietary patterns are dependent on national cultures, food habits and regulatory contexts. Some countries have launched national plans on nutrition and physical activities and others are thinking of doing so. It is necessary to act now.
- Adding to this the Council of the European Union adopted the 2nd of December 2002 a Council conclusion on obesity inviting the Commission to reinforce its efforts to prevent and combat obesity and to support the Member States in their efforts to prevent and manage obesity, to continue to strengthen the research on obesity, and to ensure that prevention of obesity is taken into account in all relevant Community policies.

The agencies and institutions are committed:

- to work closer on this issue and to take initiatives to help effective nutritional policies to be developed and implemented at national and European levels;
- to look for means to act on changing consumption patterns and nutritional content of high energy food;
- to explore different ways of approaching the problem in the various target populations, especially children, e.g. via educational training, promoting physical exercise, striking the right dietary balance at school, taking into account the influence of promotional activities, selling machines, and the need to reduce commercial pressure through all forms of promotion of foods to children;
- to call on the food and catering industry to recognise their responsibilities on this matter and to work with them to help to reach a solution.

* This statement has been adopted on an informal meeting in Paris, 13 January 2004, of:

Austria:	Österreichische Agentur für Gesundheit und Ernährungssicherheit GmbH
Belgium:	Service public fédéral (SPF) Santé publique, sécurité de la chaîne alimentaire et environnement
Denmark:	Danish Veterinary and Food Agency
Finland:	National Food Agency (EVI)
France:	Afssa - Agence française de sécurité sanitaire des aliments
Germany:	Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung (BfR)
Greece:	Hellenic Food Authority (E.F.E.T.)
Ireland:	Food Safety Authority of Ireland
Italy:	Istituto Superiore di Sanità
Luxembourg:	Ministère de l'Agriculture

The Netherlands:	Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (VWA)
Norway:	Norwegian Food Safety Authority
Portugal:	Portuguese Heart Foundation
Spain:	Agencia Espanola de Seguridad Alimentaria
Sweden:	National Food Administration
United Kingdom:	Food Standards Agency