Ultra-processed foods: an EU health crisis

Many European countries have seen a dramatic increase in the consumption of ultra-processed foods in recent decades, with research estimating that these food products contribute to up to half of total daily energy intake.

Ultra-processed foods often go through multiple processes and modifications prior to consumption and have a high content of saturated fat, added sugar and salt. Studies have demonstrated a link between ultra-processed food consumption and a range of chronic digestive diseases, such as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, liver cancer and colorectal cancer. In addition, a 10% increase in the proportion of ultra-processed foods in the diet is associated with a > 10% increase in risk of all cancers.

Consumption of Ultra-processed food in Europe

2% Salty snacks
2% Fats
15% Processed meats
5% Meats, fish, eggs
7% Dairy products
10% Ultra-processed fruits and vegetables
16% Starchy foods and breakfast cereals
20% Drinks
26% Sugary products
20% Ultra-processed fruits and vegetables

Fuelling the Obesity Epidemic

As well as increasing the risk of chronic digestive diseases, the rising intake of ultra-processed foods is fuelling the obesity crisis across Europe. Over half of the adult EU population, and one in every three children aged 6-9, is either overweight or obese, leading to huge increases in cardiovascular disease and mortality. These rates are only set to rise in the foreseeable future, leading to one of the greatest and most significant public health challenges we face today.

Obesity-related costs drain €81 billion from European economies per year.

33% of Europe’s school-aged children are estimated to be overweight.

52% of the adult EU population is overweight or obese.
Addressing unhealthy dietary patterns through mandatory front-of-pack labelling

To promote optimal digestive health and to reduce the burden inflicted by obesity and chronic digestive diseases, United European Gastroenterology (UEG) calls for the adoption of mandatory front-of-pack labelling (FOPL) across the EU.

Voluntary food labelling schemes are currently present in many EU Member States, resulting in a lack of adherence from food manufacturers who are able to direct and control what people eat. Countries that do have food labelling policies employ different schemes and regulations, resulting in a fragmented and inconsistent approach across the continent.

It is vital that dietary control is placed into the hands of consumers through the effective adoption of EU-wide mandatory food labelling policy. The implementation of a simple, informative and uniform FOPL approach could help to educate the public, improve dietary patterns and promote healthy lifestyles.

In accordance with WHO guidelines, UEG recommends:

- Policy development that is led by government and based on the latest scientific research and guidelines
- Labelling that utilises interpretational visual aides to help swift decision making
- Supporting initiatives to aid implementation, such as the development of guidance documents for industry to facilitate label adoption and public education programmes to stimulate consumer knowledge and demand
- A formal and comprehensive FOPL policy monitoring and evaluation programme to assess implementation and impact, such as purchasing and consumption changes, nutritional knowledge in consumers and potential health benefits

A consistent government-led FOPL system will:

- Provide consumers with improved and credible evaluative judgements about the nutritional content within food products
- Aid consumer understanding of nutritional information
- Support consumers to make informed purchasing decisions and choose nutritionally favourable products
- Encourage consumers to reduce their intake of ultra-processed foods (and in turn saturated fat, sugar and salt)
- Help drive food manufacturers to reformulate their products to ensure they are healthier and avoid unfavourable nutritional content

References:


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