Abstract

The Representation of Non-Meat Proteins in Food-Based Dietary Guidelines: A Review of National Guidelines in Europe †

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Abstract: Background: To reduce the risk of chronic disease and the environmental impact of the food system, the FAO/WHO recommend a shift towards more plant-based diets, with reduced intakes of red and processed meat. Sustainable diet messaging, including messaging on non-meat proteins in national food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs), is one tool for encouraging population dietary shift. Objectives: to understand how protein foods are represented in FBDGs in Europe, including non-meat protein sources, and the extent to which meat reduction messaging are incorporated. Methods: A review of national FBDGs in Europe, as listed in the FAO repository of global FBDGs, was undertaken between February and March 2023. The review identified which protein sources were displayed pictorially in food guides and mentioned in accompanying resources, plus any meat reduction messages. Where FBDGs were not available in English, Google Translate was used. Results: A total of 35 national FBDGs were published in FAO’s European region between 2002 (Croatia) and 2022 (Spain, Turkey); 30 FBDGs incorporated pictorial food guides and 34 provided text guidance. In pictorial representations of the protein food groups, three had no food images, eight showed animal-based proteins only (including dairy products and eggs), and 19 showed both animal and non-meat proteins, of which one (Israel) separated meat and eggs from plant sources of proteins, grouping them with dairy products, in keeping with Kashrut law. 12 FBDGs provided information on non-animal protein sources in text guidance: all mentioned legumes, five mentioned alternative protein sources, specifically tofu (five), soy products and mycoprotein (three) and vegetarian foods/alternatives (four). In total, 23 FBDGs mentioned general meat reduction, 12 advised to eat less total meat or limit consumption, and 12 advised to ‘limit red meat’ and 18 to limit ‘processed meat’. Discussion: This analysis shows that many European countries lack practical population-level recommendations on healthy, sustainable diets. Greater use of pictorial and textual references to non-meat protein sources in FBDGs would increase awareness of plant- and fungi-derived sources, as more sustainable protein sources. It would be prudent to incorporate more varied protein sources, including both plant- and fungi-derived protein sources, in updates to national FBDGs.

Keywords: mycoprotein; sustainable diet; food-based dietary guidelines

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