

Policies for a healthier European diet: Are they effective?

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(Medical Xpress) -- A Europe-wide project led by the University of Reading to assess the effect of policies encouraging healthier eating has found that much more work still needs to be done for these to be successful.

EATWELL is an EU-funded project that aims to help tackle one of the greatest public health challenges of the 21st century: unhealthy diets. European Union member states have initiated various national policy campaigns to encourage physical activity and healthier diets. The EATWELL project was devised to identify the successes, failures and uncertainties of these campaigns and use the results to provide advice for policy-makers on creating more successful healthy eating policies.

The latest results from the project were announced this week at the European Nutrition Conference in Madrid.

Bruce Traill, Professor of Food Economics at the University of Reading, said: "Very little work has been done on how policy interventions introduced by governments across Europe impact on behavior - do people actually change their diets, their eating habits as result?"

"EATWELL's international team of researchers reviewed healthy eating policy actions, interviewed policy-makers and industry, and surveyed more than 3,000 European citizens as well as undertook fresh analysis of data. The work has led to the identification of over 100 [policy interventions](#) in Europe. However, not all of these had the desired effects."

Two broad categories of intervention were identified; those aimed at supporting more informed choice by providing information or education, such as the UK 5-a-day information campaign or nutrition labelling, and those seeking to change the market environment by changing prices or [food availability](#), such as imposing taxes on foods high in saturated fat or providing vouchers for disadvantaged consumers.

Some policies were found to be almost absent in Europe, such as [nutrition information](#) on menus, fiscal measures and nutrition-related food standards. Current evidence suggests that information and education measures show limited success. Attitudes and knowledge have been enhanced but behavior has been slow to follow. Fiscal measures, such as fat taxes, are only starting to be implemented in Europe, but the body of evidence collected outside Europe suggests they elicit small behavioral responses, but large tax revenues.

The Mediterranean countries and transition economies have only a recent history of policy action and these are mostly confined to

information and education measures.

Professor Traill said: "We want to determine which interventions work in order to give advice to governments and the EU as to which ones are effective, both in terms of encouraging [healthy eating](#) and cost effectiveness."

In its final year, findings and recommendations for action will be exposed to stakeholders for feedback in a series of workshops.

Provided by University of Reading

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