

# Scientists scrutinise the European diet

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Italian risotto, Spanish paella and the British traditional Sunday roast (consisting of roasted meat, roast potatoes and vegetables). - these are only a small sample of foods which symbolise individual countries and the diversity of diets across Europe currently being scrutinised by scientists. The aim is to research Europeans' daily exposure to food contaminants, which could lead to changing eating habits for better health.

The variety of food that makes each country so unique is precisely what makes the European [Food Safety](#) Authority (EFSA)'s job in assessing both the levels of [beneficial compounds](#) and harmful substances more difficult.

Statistician Dr Jean-Luc Volatier is the coordinator of an EU-funded project called Total Diet Study (TDS) Exposure and is head of the Scientific support department for risk assessment at the French food safety agency ANSES. He says, 'The problem is that we are lacking a common European methodology. The project's goal is to develop a network [to gather data from various European countries] in order to be able to compare exposure to nutrients or contaminants, like [heavy metals](#) or pesticide residuals.'

This is something food safety scientists have not been able to do to date because data is collected differently in every country, or even not collected at all in some eastern European countries. Dr Volatier adds, 'When comparable exposure data is available the quality of risk assessment will improve, and it will be possible to adapt and improve regulations.' This suggests that EU citizens will indirectly benefit from such research.

A number of high-profile health experts have provided their insights on the European diet. As toxicologist Francesco Cubadda, from the Higher Institute for Health ISS, in Rome explains, 'To evaluate [food contamination](#) levels of harmful chemical contaminant in each nation's diet, you first assess the total diet in a country, then you collect food samples to reconstruct the architecture of [food consumption](#). After analysing those samples, and determining the average concentration of the chemicals, you can combine those data and determine the exposure and thus the risk associated with the average consumption.'

The data collected from the project will also provide a valuable source

of information for nutritionists such as Julia Wärnberg, a medical nutritionist from Karolinska Institute in Sweden, who explains, 'These studies have a multidisciplinary effect. Total diet studies are valuable for nutritionists because they help provide us with reliable data on less studied nutrients as well as contaminants when we study health effects of different dietary pattern. For example, current food composition databases do not include metals such as mercury, to reliably assess this kind of hazards in our dietary recommendations.'

Miquel Porta, professor of epidemiology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Spain, also welcomes the project as 'necessary' and logical. He believes the outcome of projects such as TDS Exposure could help improve the way controls are performed and ensure that ultimately people are exposed to a minimum amount of harmful substances. He concludes, 'The presence of contaminants such as dioxins and other [so-called] organochlorine compounds [including pesticides] in the food chain tells us that the controls by both the administrations and the food companies are inefficient, we are facing a systemic problem that affects [food](#), agriculture and environment.'

Provided by CORDIS

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