Micronutrients intake mapped out

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Credit: Teresa Stanton

A new guiding framework is designed to help national governments determine recommended daily vitamins and minerals intake, depending on where they live in Europe.

Micronutrients are minerals and vitamins, such as iodine, iron, or vitamin A. Although ingested in tiny amounts, they are an essential part of our diet. Deficiencies often result in medical disorders, such as goiter and hypothyroidism, caused by iodine deficiencies in population living far from the sea. The general public and food manufacturers therefore need to know the daily requirements of these micronutrients.

The definition of which minerals and vitamins are considered micronutrients is quite unified throughout Europe. The recommendations for daily amounts that are required, however, vary

widely. Taking the example of neighbouring countries such as Belgium and France, "[these countries] might have completely different recommendations for micronutrients [even though they] normally should be similar because [people in these countries] have similar eating habits or similar cultures," says Eva Grammatikaki, scientific and EC project manager at the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI Europe) in Brussels, Belgium. Grammatikaki is also the project coordinator of an EU-funded research project called EURRECA, a network created in response to the disparities of recommendations throughout Europe.

Although initially the network aimed at introducing recommendations for the different micronutrients at a European level, the network quickly changed focus. "We decided not to come up with a list of recommendations for all countries, but rather with a framework that would allow individual countries to come up with their own recommendations," says Grammatikaki. "We provided the tools to identify and assess which instruments are the best for achieving this," she tells youris.com. These tools are intended to allow each country to derive the reference values for daily intake, and how to study the research literature. "You need this scientific information on the consequences and health effects of the intake of different micronutrients," says Grammatikaki.

Experts recognise that this approach makes absolute sense because each country may face its own obstacles to the creation of micronutrient recommendations. "Every country has its own food-culture, which means that in some countries the nutrient intake might be higher or cannot be achieved, and also the availability and the nutrient value of some of the food products is not the same in every country," says Merel Hazewindus, a nutrition researcher at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. There are other factors that require the focussing on individual countries too. "In some countries people take more food supplements than others, which might distort general health

assessments," she tells youris.com.

The project's approach could also be a way to solve a broader problem in nutrition. "One of the biggest bottlenecks in Europe is to be able to compare problems and to evaluate them correctly," says Joop Van Raaij, a researcher in public health and nutrition at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in Wageningen, the Netherlands, "and it is important that in each country data are collected and also interpreted in a comparable way."

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