

Advice

Health and Environmental Value of Seafood

Brussels, 8 October 2021

1. Introduction

Under the European Green Deal¹ and the Farm to Fork Strategy², the European Commission recognised the importance of promoting sustainable food consumption and facilitating the shift to healthy, sustainable diets. The Strategy even exemplifies that farmed fish and seafood generate a lower carbon footprint than animal production on land.

In terms of nutritional characteristics, fisheries and aquaculture products are a source of energy and protein with high biological value and contributes to the intake of essential nutrients, such as iodine, selenium, calcium, and vitamins A and D, with well-established health benefits. Seafood, mainly fatty fish, also provides n-3 long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (LCPUFA) and is a component of dietary patterns associated with good health³. Unsaturated fatty acids, omega 3 (predominant in fish), improve high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol levels but also reduce the probability of the blood clots, help to control blood pressure and control arrhythmia⁴. There is convincing scientific evidence of the health benefits derived from the consumption of seafood,

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – The European Green Deal

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2019:640:FIN>

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0381>

³ European Food Safety Authority, Scientific Opinion on health benefits of seafood (fish and shellfish) consumption in relation to risks associated with exposure to methylmercury, EFSA Journal 2014;12(7):3761

<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/3761>

⁴ Adrià, F., Fuster, V., Corbella, J., La cocina de la salud. Spain: Editorial Planeta, 2010

associated with the intake of fatty acids: long chain omega-3s reduces the risk of death from coronary heart disease, improves neurological development in infants and young children when the fish is consumed by the mother before and during the pregnancy, and contains docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) that contributes to maintaining the normal functioning of the brain and the maintenance of the preservation of vision under normal conditions⁵. In terms of environmental characteristics, in comparison with other protein sources, seafood products generally have a lower carbon footprint, require little terrestrial surface and freshwater, and benefit from the biological efficiency of aquatic animals.

In the recent decades, the patterns of food consumption in Europe changed rapidly. There is an increase in the consumption of processed foods high in saturated fats, free sugars and salt. Non-adherence to dietary guidelines is widespread among both adults and children. Dietary factors are a leading cause of mortality and morbidity in Europe, contributing to hypertension and cardiovascular diseases, overweight/obesity, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer⁶. As an example, in Spain, seafood household consumption decreased by 4,17 kg per person between

⁵ EFSA Panel on Dietetic Products, Nutrition and Allergies (NDA); Scientific Opinion on the substantiation of health claims related to eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), docosapentaenoic acid (DPA) and maintenance of normal cardiac function (ID 504, 506, 516, 527, 538, 703, 1128, 1317, 1324, 1325), maintenance of normal blood glucose concentrations (ID 566), maintenance of normal blood pressure (ID 506, 516, 703, 1317, 1324), maintenance of normal blood HDL-cholesterol concentrations (ID 506), maintenance of normal (fasting) blood concentrations of triglycerides (ID 506, 527, 538, 1317, 1324, 1325), maintenance of normal blood LDL-cholesterol concentrations (ID 527, 538, 1317, 1325, 4689), protection of the skin from photo-oxidative (UV-induced) damage (ID 530), improved absorption of EPA and DHA (ID 522, 523), contribution to the normal function of the immune system by decreasing the levels of eicosanoids, arachidonic acid-derived mediators and pro-inflammatory cytokines (ID 520, 2914), and “immunomodulating agent” (4690) pursuant to Article 13(1) of Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006. EFSA Journal 2010;8(10):1796. [32 pp.]. doi:10.2903/j.efsa.2010.1796.

Available online: www.efsa.europa.eu/efsajournal.htm

⁶ Improving dietary intake and achieving food product environment, WHO regional office for Europe, 2020.

<https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease-prevention/nutrition/publications/2020/improving-dietary-intake-and-achieving-food-product-improvement-2020>

2013 and 2019⁷, even though seafood is considered as a healthy food under the nutritional guidelines adopted by the WHO, Member States, and scientific institutions.

2. Recommendations

While aiming to fulfil the objectives of the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy, it is essential that the Commission possesses the best available scientific information on the health and environmental benefits of fishery and aquaculture products. Different policy initiatives with an impact on the EU market must be considered and there should be close cooperation with the operators of the seafood supply chain and other relevant stakeholders. As such, the MAC believes that the European Commission should:

- a) Ensure that the scientifically demonstrated health and environmental benefits of fishery and aquaculture products are properly reflected in policy initiatives, particularly under the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy⁸;
- b) Ensure that communication to consumers, including under the ongoing policy actions on marketing standards, food information to consumers, substantiating of green claims, and empowering the consumer for the green transition, adequately conveys the health and environmental benefits of fishery and aquaculture products;
- c) Promote sustainable seafood consumption and healthy nutritional habits, including through nutrition education for the general consumer and in schools, in accordance with international and national nutritional recommendations;
- d) Ensure that the valuable nutritional qualities of fishery and aquaculture products are properly taken into consideration in simplified front-of-pack nutritional labelling

⁷ Informe del consumo de alimentación en España, 2020, MAPA

⁸ In terms of the promotion of sustainable food consumption and the shift to healthy, sustainable diets, the Strategy seems to focus more The Farm to Fork Strategy seems to emphasise more on the insufficient consumption of whole-grain cereals, fruit and vegetables, legumes and nuts, without mentioned fishery and aquaculture products.

schemes, such as Nutri-score and other scores, for which the Commission could propose as harmonised front-of-pack nutritional labelling schemes⁹;

- e) Assess the ongoing changes in European consumers' seafood habits, including the emergence of e-commerce, the decline of traditional sales channels, and the decrease in time dedicated to grocery shopping and cooking;
- f) Promote a diversification of consumption habits by increasing awareness of less consumed species of seafood, as a way to decrease potential overfishing of popular species and discarding of unwanted ones;
- g) Undertake additional studies on the characteristics of seafood products, particularly on the benefits of selenium, impact of mercury, presence/inactivation of anisakis larvae, as well as on the measurement of the carbon footprint (including Life Cycle Assessment);
- h) Ensure that the EU promotion programme for agricultural and food products adequately covers fishery and aquaculture products, including through facilitated access to the programme to fishery and aquaculture products operators and increased support for SMEs¹⁰;
- i) Take action to develop a low and harmonised VAT tax rate across the EU for healthy and sustainably sourced fishery and aquaculture products¹¹, as a way to guarantee affordable nutritious products, to reduce public expenditure connected to poor dietary choices, and to ensure a level-playing-field among market operators¹²;

⁹ On 10 December 2020, the MAC adopted advice about Nutri-score labelling on fish products. It is available online: <https://marketac.eu/en/commissions-reply-nutri-score-labelling-on-fish-products/>

¹⁰ See the MAC's Advice on the Roadmap on the EU Promotion Programme for Agricultural and Food Products, which was adopted on 18 March 2021: <https://marketac.eu/en/mac-advice-eu-promotion-programme/>

¹¹ It is also worth noting that, in most Member States, caviar products are generally classified as a "luxury product" with a tax rate around 20%, even though these products are full of unsaturated fatty acids and are much healthier than other products often taxed at lower rates.

¹² VAT rates currently variate from 0% in Ireland to 21% in Latvia.



- j) Extend the coverage of the EU's School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme to include healthy and sustainable fishery and aquaculture products, in order to promote healthy diets in children, in line with international and national nutritional recommendations.