

Summary report on the

Regional meeting to standardize and update food composition tables, reflecting sugar, trans fat, saturated fat and salt contents

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Rabat, Morocco
20–22 September 2016



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

Evidence has shown that food composition data, in the form of food composition tables or food composition databases, is very important for policy-makers to be able to reduce the double burden of malnutrition. Food composition data contribute to improvement in nutrition surveillance systems, which, in turn, help to inform policy. Food composition data in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region is often incomplete, outdated or unreliable. Some countries have no food composition data. As the burden of diet-related noncommunicable diseases grows rapidly in the Region, it is particularly important to have data on the levels of sugar, fats (including saturated and trans fatty acids) and salt in foods.

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean organized a regional meeting on 20–22 September 2016 in Rabat, Morocco, to standardize and update food composition tables in the Region, reflecting sugar, trans fat, saturated fat and salt contents. For the purposes of the meeting, it was agreed to focus on trans fatty acids (TFA), total fat, saturated fatty acids (SFA), salt, free sugars and vitamin D. Participants from six countries in the Region, selected because of their recent progress on compiling food composition data, took part in the meeting, along with international experts, observers and WHO staff. The meeting objectives were to:

- review current regional food composition tables and identify gaps in data and information;
- sensitize key regional partners, including academia, on international standards for food composition tables including data and information needed to fill gaps; and
- agree on a standard model to be used by concerned institutions and academia, which is needed for assessment of dietary intake of various age groups and to serve food labelling and safety.

In his opening message, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, noted that while food composition tables traditionally included a variety of nutrients and other components of foods thought to be related to health, regional food composition tables were missing key nutrients known to be linked to health and nutrition status, such as SFA, TFA, salt, sugar, vitamin D, zinc and other nutrients. Most Member States in the Region were using international food composition tables that reflected the western diet, which has different contents of nutrients, especially for composite and traditional dishes, he said.

Dr Alwan observed that there was a need to review and update the estimates of food group intakes to reflect recent dietary guidelines. Member States of the Region required this review to help them in developing, implementing and monitoring food and nutrition policies and assessing the nutritional status of their populations. Food composition data was also needed for product development, food labelling and related regulatory measures for promoting healthy diet, and complying with national and international standards and regulations.

2. Summary of discussions

There is a need for more cooperation and collaboration, and potential exists for Member States to mutually support one another's work, with strategic help from WHO and external expert advisors.

The publication of results and methodology of analyses is important, including the sampling report along with the data. In terms of coding descriptions of food products, Member States should use coding systems, such as LanguaL, to describe foods, in order to facilitate exchange of data. Islamic Republic of Iran was urged to share valuable data from its analysis of 60 key foods as part of compiling new food composition tables.

The Moroccan experience in developing food composition tables was seen an excellent example of how a great deal can be achieved with relatively limited resources. There are potential benefits from future cooperation between Morocco and Tunisia in pooling their efforts in this area. Bilateral discussions have already taken place to harmonize methodology, and ongoing discussions will be important to avoid any duplication and ensure that both countries can benefit from one another's work.

Priorities should be TFA, total fat, SFA, salt, sugars and vitamin D. It is important, therefore, that countries focus on foods that contribute most of these nutrients of concern to the diet. It is important to look at the bigger picture of food supply—examining issues about how food is produced, how much is imported, what is used in processed foods and how foods are eaten by consumers.

Differences between urban and rural areas need to be addressed. A previous dietary survey in Morocco, conducted in 2000, would be a useful starting point for highlighting differences between rural and urban areas in terms of how much food is cooked at home, differences in imported/domestic foods purchased, and so on. WHO has already funded a study to assess the sources of salt and TFAs in rural and urban diets in Morocco, and these data can also be used to identify rural/urban differences.

Work on the related area of improving and standardizing methods for measuring food consumption is important. Nutrition policy needs to be informed and guided by data on both food composition and food consumption.

Regarding the establishment of a national food composition table in Kuwait, existing data on composite dishes remains a good starting

point, even though it dates back 16–20 years. Information on why or how foods might have changed (for example, changes in standards or changes in composition of ingredients) may be used to highlight priorities for new analyses. In order to estimate sugars, the options are either to do completely separate analyses (as samples were not kept) or to estimate free sugars from recipe/ingredient lists.

Plans to collaborate on development of a regional approach for the Gulf region are welcome. There exists a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-wide agreement on standards for labelling and TFA. The plan is to have a harmonized approach to all problem solving and methodological issues to eliminate duplication, and to collaborate to save time and resources. It is important to recognize that there are important differences between countries—for example, ghee is commonly used in some countries but not others. It was suggested that where national food consumption surveys are not available, household budget surveys could be used for data on national food patterns and, for example, rural versus urban purchases.

The work being implemented in Pakistan to revise the food composition database and develop dietary guidelines represents an opportunity to establish a coherent programme. The experts participating in the meeting agreed to provide detailed advice on the proposed analytical programme and the contract with the external laboratory. A useful source of guidance is the European Food Information Resource (EuroFIR) network, which has developed a checklist for drawing up contracts with laboratories.

Although this kind of work can appear daunting to countries that have less well-developed food composition datasets, countries in the Region can learn from the European experience and collaboration between countries can support the process and eliminate duplication.

The EuroFIR network has helped some countries joining with no data to become operational within six years. A key element of this success was that European Union funding for joint projects encouraged countries to work together. Joining the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) International Network of Food Data Systems (INFOODS) Listserve is recommended, as it is a good source of information from which it is possible to ask questions and get a range of replies.

Common challenges faced throughout the Region include:

- a general lack of data on food intakes and/or consumption patterns;
- a shortage of accredited laboratories for analysis in country;
- the absence of a regional network to standardize procedures—although the INFOODS Listserve exists, and is easy to access, there is a lack of communication and little exchange between countries;
- weak political support (at different levels) for action on this issue;
- a need for subregional clusters, involving the key people in each country;
- challenges around sample collection;
- a lack of capacity and a need for training; and
- a need to balance prioritization of key data with a more comprehensive approach—it was noted that samples could be stored for possible later analysis for further components or by new methods, and where composite dishes are analysed, recipes should be kept.

3. The way forward

A number of steps were identified for the way forward for the Region.

1. *Raising the issue through existing multisectoral nutrition mechanisms.* It is recommended that nutrition focal points raise

the importance of developing and updating food composition tables/databases through the nutrition policy mechanism in their country. This could involve using external experts and/or WHO representatives to advocate for the importance of the issue. Member States should contact WHO if support is needed to raise awareness of the issue. It may also be useful to discuss the issue with representatives of the donor community.

2. *Establishing an Eastern Mediterranean network.* Creation of a regional network is recommended for sharing information between Member States and with relevant experts. WHO will take forward this recommendation by notifying focal points in all Member States and developing, in consultation with experts, an online information exchange network for sharing of information and for provision of advice/information. For such a network to thrive and be effective it will be important for Member States to fully engage and participate in the exchange of information.
3. *Conducting regional training and a capacity-building workshop.* In addition to online information exchange and e-learning, it is important to facilitate exchange and capacity-building in other ways. It was suggested that a regional training and capacity-building workshop be organized for this purpose. It is important to differentiate between the training needs of those working in laboratories and the needs of those working on compilation of tables/databases, and to ensure that the right audience is targeted.
4. *Making technical support visits to countries.* For more specific support to countries, technical support visits are recommended. These could involve FAO/WHO visits, involving relevant external experts, to work directly with those responsible for setting up food composition databases in country and/or those working in laboratories. Such visits could also be valuable in advocating for

the importance of the work and, through meetings with government and potential donors, mobilizing resources.

5. *Agreeing recommendations for standard methods.* Following the discussions on methodology during the meeting, recommendations for standard methods emerged. These agreed methods are recommended for all countries in the Region.
6. *Establishing centres of excellence for particular methods.* It was suggested that, following specific training, some centres of excellence could be established in the Region for particular analytical methods.

4. Regional sub-cluster collaboration

It was agreed that cooperation between Member States in small regional sub-clusters would be a useful way for countries to help each other and make progress on these issues.

Suggested country clusters and ways in which countries could mutually support one another were identified (see below).

Two other countries, Djibouti and Somalia, will decide whether to work together or to join one of the other clusters.

Suggested cluster: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates

Current situation: Kuwait has analysed 107 composite dishes; analysis includes a fatty acid profile but does not include sugars and data is now 16–20 years old; some data is available from other GCC countries. This cluster of GCC countries is already moving towards establishment of a network for countries to update and exchange information on data collection, analytical procedures and so on.

Kuwait is happy to lead the work for this sub-cluster, collaborating with technical and political focal points in each country, and consolidating existing data (including on composite dishes) across the sub-Region.

Suggested cluster: Afghanistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq and Pakistan

Current situation: Islamic Republic of Iran has indirect data on 300 foods and analytical results on the top 60 foods, including fatty acid profile with TFAs but no sugars; Pakistan is about to conduct analyses on a wide range of foods. Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan agreed a number of steps: to exchange material (to be sent for proficiency testing in each other's laboratories); to sign a Memorandum of Understanding between countries to exchange technical support; and to share existing data (Islamic Republic of Iran) with the sub-Region through the online network to be established.

Suggested cluster: Morocco and Tunisia, and possible future collaboration with Algeria, Libya and Mauritania

Current situation: Tunisia has conducted a very recent analysis on processed foods, fast foods, bread, oil, cheese, processed meats and cheeses. Analysis includes fatty acid profiles, sugar and salt. Morocco has also conducted some analyses on fast foods and traditional dishes and has compiled a food composition table for over 400 foods using borrowed data.

Morocco and Tunisia agreed a number of steps for future collaboration. The two countries will sign an agreement to: review the analytical methods available and used in each country and list all laboratories; list foods to include in the food composition tables,

identify common and specific foods for each country, and select key foods; select samples in each country using the same protocol; choose analytical methods according to international standards (WHO support will be needed to train technicians); and split analyses between the two countries. It was agreed that the data from existing Tunisian analyses could be shared with the regional network (in Excel format) and there is no need to await publication. Morocco will also share results of some analyses on fast foods and traditional foods.

Suggested cluster: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan and Syrian Arab Republic

Current situation: Egypt has data on 470 food items, including data on fatty acid profile (including TFAs), but no sugars; Jordan is known to have some data (such as on salt) and is working on compiling food composition data. Palestine also has data on salt. Egypt agreed to share its current data and seek expert advice on the most appropriate next steps. It was agreed that WHO would facilitate contact between all the proposed members of the cluster and a network would be established.



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