

Unhealthy eating habits outpacing healthy eating patterns in most world regions

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Worldwide, consumption of healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables has improved during the past two decades, but has been outpaced by the increased intake of unhealthy foods including processed meat and sweetened drinks in most world regions, according to the first study to assess diet quality in 187 countries covering almost 4.5 billion adults, published in *The Lancet Global Health* journal.

The findings reveal that diet patterns vary widely by national income, with [high-income countries](#) generally having better diets based on healthy foods (average score difference +2.5 points), but substantially poorer diets due to a higher intake of [unhealthy foods](#) compared with low-income countries (average score difference -33.0 points). On average, older people and women seem to consume better diets.

The highest scores for healthy foods were noted in several low-income countries (eg, Chad and Mali) and Mediterranean nations (eg, Turkey and Greece), possibly reflecting favourable aspects of the Mediterranean diet. In contrast, low scores for healthy foods were shown for some central European countries and republics of the former Soviet Union (eg, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan).

Of particular interest was that the large national differences in [diet quality](#) were not seen, or were far less apparent, when overall diet quality (including both healthy and unhealthy foods) was examined as previous studies have done.

"By 2020, projections indicate that non-communicable diseases will account for 75% of all deaths. Improving diet has a crucial role to play in reducing this burden", says Dr Imamura. "Our findings have implications for governments and international bodies worldwide. The distinct dietary trends based on healthy and unhealthy foods, we highlight, indicate the need to understand different, multiple causes of these trends, such as agricultural, food industry, and health policy. Policy actions in multiple domains are essential to help people achieve optimal diets to control the obesity epidemic and reduce non-communicable diseases in all regions of the world."

According to Dr Mozaffarian, "There is a particularly urgent need to focus on improving diet quality among poorer populations. If we do nothing, undernutrition will be rapidly eclipsed by obesity and [non-communicable diseases](#), as is already being seen in India, China, and other middle-income countries."

Writing in a linked Comment, Carlo La Vecchia from the University of Milan in Italy and Lluís Serra-Majem from the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in Spain say, "The key focus of the paper remains the need to understand the agricultural, trade, and food industry, and health policy determinants to improve dietary patterns and nutrition in various areas, taking into account the traditional characteristics of diets worldwide... Information about the environmental effect of dietary patterns will be needed in the future [particularly from low and middle income countries], because food not only drives human health, but also the health of the planet."

More information: Imamura F, Micha R, Khatibzadeh S, Fahimi S, Shi P, Powles J, and Mozaffarian D on behalf of the Global Burden of Disease Nutrition and Chronic Diseases Expert Group (NutriCoDE). "Dietary quality among men and women in 187 countries in 1990 and 2010". *The Lancet Global Health*. February 19, 2015.

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