


Healthy Diets Defined: Implications for Dairy in Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines



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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Lack of a consensus definition of a healthy diet stalls progress in nutrition policy, which is why the Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization - two influential agencies – published one in late 2024
- The Food and Agriculture Organization plans to release guidance for governments on the adoption of Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines that include environmental, socio-cultural, and economic considerations necessary to enable healthy diets for all
- Advocacy by the dairy sector will be necessary to ensure dairy is recognized as a valuable contributor to culturally relevant dietary patterns that adhere to Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines

The global food and agriculture system needs urgent change to feed a growing population while tackling hunger, obesity, and nutrient deficiencies, improving health, and protecting the environment. A lack of agreement on what defines a healthy diet slows progress.

To address this, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) released a joint statement in late 2024 titled, [What are Healthy Diets?](#)¹ They define healthy diets as those that support growth, active lifestyles, disease prevention, and overall well-being based on the four pillars of adequacy, balance, moderation, and dietary diversity.

FAO's mission is to lead international efforts to defeat hunger with the goal of achieving food security for all, ensuring that people have regular access to enough high-quality food to lead active healthy lives. WHO is dedicated to the well-being of all so that everyone, everywhere can attain the highest level of health. The collaboration between FAO and WHO to define healthy diets is significant, because it signals a more holistic approach to dietary guidance, integrating expertise in both public health with agricultural practices.

The joint statement is a precursor to the much-anticipated release of FAO guidance for governments that are developing or updating Dietary Guidelines with an agrifood systems' lens. Establishing a unified definition of healthy diets provides clear guidance that can be adopted by countries globally and include the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic considerations necessary to enable healthy diets for all.

The implications of the joint definition of healthy diets by FAO and WHO present opportunities and challenges for the global dairy sector. While the importance of animal-sourced foods, such

as dairy, in providing adequate nutrition are emphasized, concerns about individual nutrients, such as salt, sugar, and fat, have the potential to unintentionally jeopardize the integral role that certain dairy foods, such as cheese, flavored milk, and yogurt play in ensuring nutritional security. Furthermore, assessing the environmental impact of food choices without considering their nutritional and health benefits can be misleading. Therefore, the global dairy sector must proactively share evidence of dairy's important role in sustainable, healthy diets with key stakeholders involved in the adoption of Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines (FSBDG).

The Significance of Adopting Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines

Dietary Guidelines around the world have the potential to play a significant role in nutrition and health policies that affect the food environment. In some countries, such as the United States, they:

- Determine what food products are allowed in school meal and food assistance programs
- Affect food labeling and standards by ensuring products align with recommended dietary practices, which are intended to help the government address nutritional deficiencies and prevent chronic disease
- Provide benchmarking to help policymakers evaluate the effectiveness of nutrition and health policies and programs

The adoption of FSBDG marks a significant shift in nutrition policy, making it more holistic by incorporating environmental sustainability, socio-cultural and economic factors across the entire food value chain - from production to consumption. While this approach presents opportunities for dairy to highlight its contributions to sustainable, healthy diets, it also brings challenges that must be carefully navigated.

Healthy Diets Are at the Core of Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines

FAO and WHO consider four core principles of healthy diets and guidance to substantiate each principle:

- **Adequate** providing enough essential nutrients to prevent deficiencies and promote health, without excess
- **Balanced** in energy intake and food sources to promote healthy weight, growth, and disease prevention
- **Moderate** in consumption of foods, nutrients, or other compounds associated with detrimental effects
- **Diverse** including a wide variety of nutritious foods within and across food groups to favor nutrient adequacy and consumption of other health promoting substances

To achieve adequacy, they recommend that infants six months and younger are exclusively breastfed. As of six months of age, animal-sourced foods are acknowledged by FAO and WHO as

good sources of high-quality protein and bioavailable vitamins and minerals. As such, in addition to continued breastfeeding, they recommend daily consumption of animal-sourced foods, including unprocessed meat, fish, or eggs. For older infants that are no longer breastfed, FAO and WHO recommend pasteurized whole milk.

To achieve balance, they recommend that protein come from a mix of animal and plant sources, acknowledging that digestibility and quality should be considered. It has been well established that animal-sourced foods provide digestible, high-quality protein and help optimize plant-rich diets by providing indispensable amino acids, vitamins and minerals. FAO and WHO recommend that fat consumed be primarily from unsaturated fatty acids (liquid oils) from plant sources, and carbohydrates consumed be primarily from whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and pulses.

To achieve moderation, FAO and WHO recommend certain nutrients - sodium, free sugars (added sugar, sugar from syrups, fruit juices, and fruit juice concentrates), and saturated fat - be restricted in the diet, and industrially produced *trans*-fat, such as from partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, should not be consumed. Further, FAO and WHO call for avoidance or moderation in consumption of red and processed meat and ultra-processed food (UPF) citing negative effects on health.

To achieve dietary diversity, they recommend a wide variety of foods, between and within food groups, to help increase the likelihood of meeting vitamin and mineral requirements.

Implications for Dairy in Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines

Dairy foods are recognized by FAO and WHO for their role in nutritional adequacy. [Milk is a leading provider](#) of high-quality protein and vital nutrients, and the number one provider of calcium (49%), vitamin B2 (24%), fat (15%), and the essential amino acid, lysine (18%) worldwide.² FAO and WHO recognize milk as an important source of nutrition in the diets of children with limited access to other animal-sourced foods.

FAO and WHO also recognize that dairy contributes to a balanced diet by providing high-quality and easily digestible protein and essential nutrients that complement plant-rich diets. Incorporating dairy along with a mix of animal and plant protein sources helps optimize nutrient intake, particularly for amino acids, vitamin B12, and calcium. Further, [research indicates](#) the inclusion of dairy can help promote healthy weight management and reduce the risk of chronic disease across the lifespan.³

The principle of moderation outlined by FAO and WHO, which calls for limiting salt, sugar, and fat, could signal a call for limited consumption of certain dairy foods, such as cheese and flavored dairy, indicating plain, low- and reduced-fat dairy options may be more aligned with their healthy diet recommendations. This is in contrast to findings on the [dairy matrix](#), which demonstrate that dairy foods are more than just the sum of their parts.⁴ When assessed as foods

consumed, whole-milk dairy foods, including cheese, are associated with **reduced risk** of chronic cardiometabolic disease, despite fat and sodium content.⁶

Similarly, the call to avoid UPF may result in unintentional consequences, such as avoidance of otherwise nutrient-rich and health promoting foods. Nutrient-rich dairy, including cheese and sugar-sweetened milk, yogurt, and drinkable yogurt, provide essential shortfall nutrients, particularly in the diets of vulnerable population groups. Further, some have been formulated to be lower in sugar and fortified with nutrients for which intake is low enough to be of public health concern. One proof-of-concept study from the United States demonstrated that a **dietary pattern high in UPF** does not necessarily have to equate to poor diet quality and can in fact offer affordability and convenience that can encourage healthy eating habits.⁶

FAO and WHO recognize that dairy foods are integral components of diverse dietary patterns, providing essential nutrients while offering culinary flexibility and cultural significance. Dairy foods enhance meals and contribute to balanced nutrition by optimizing plant-rich diets.

What's Next?

FAO plans to release FSB DG this year for countries to adopt when creating and updating their own Dietary Guidelines. This is where cultural context comes into play. FAO and WHO acknowledge that dietary patterns – the combinations of foods and beverages consumed over time – are highly contextual, determined by a wide variety of social, economic, and environmental factors including individual preferences and beliefs, culture, traditions, religion, income, and the availability and affordability of foods. Many dietary patterns can be healthy if they are safe and consider the four principles of adequacy, balance, moderation, and diversity.

There are steps the sector can take to ensure FSB DG at national and regional levels recognize the value of dairy in sustainable, healthy diets. The sector can continue to:

- Invest in the development of products that align with FSB DG recommendations
- Engage with policymakers by providing data and insights to advocate for the inclusion of dairy as an important provider of nutrients with demonstrated health benefits
- Facilitate nutrition education campaigns that promote the health benefits of dairy as part of a balanced diet
- Invest in research demonstrating the benefits of dairy in achieving optimal dietary patterns for nutrition and health
- Demonstrate its commitment to environmental sustainability, transparency, and traceability
- Utilize technology to enhance production efficiency, reduce waste, and improve the nutritional profile of dairy products
- Collaborate with non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and public health organization to help drive initiatives that promote the role of dairy in FSB DG
- Engage with local communities to ensure products and practices meet local preferences and needs

Global Dairy Platform (GDP) takes a coordinated approach to cross-sector collaboration and policy engagement to help ensure dairy's value is recognized in FSBDG at the global level. Key initiatives include the development of unified global messaging and increased engagement with key stakeholders that are driving agrifood system transformation. GDP actively engages in global convenings, delivering the evidence on dairy's valuable contribution to nutritional security and health within planetary boundaries, emphasizing the role of dairy development in improved livelihoods, and provides the sector with resources that can be adapted to support regional efforts.

By taking these proactive measures, the dairy sector can help ensure that dairy is recognized in FSBDG at country and regional levels for its role in contributing to healthier diets, encouraging sustainable practices, and addressing public health objectives.

DAIRY LEADERSHIP: A CALL TO ACTION

- Promote dairy's role in providing high-quality protein and micronutrients worldwide, particularly for those without access to other animal-sourced foods
- Celebrate the role of dairy in culturally appropriate dietary patterns that promote nutritional adequacy, balance, moderation, and dietary diversity
- Advocate for Food Systems Based Dietary Guidelines that promote holistic dietary patterns rather than the restriction of isolated nutrients or ingredients

For more information on the Global Dairy Platform's Perspective Papers or our Quarterly Webinar Series, please reach out to Dr. Beth Bradley at beth.bradley@globaldairyplatform.com.

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