WHOLE GRAINS: KEY PART OF HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE DIET

EVENT REPORT
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With the support of
The Whole Grain Initiative, a partnership of international organisations and scientists dedicated to promoting whole grain diets, held an event on Tuesday (19 November) to mark the first International Whole Grain Day.

The event gathered researchers and policymakers together to highlight the positive impact of whole-grain on nutrition, wellbeing, and sustainability.

Researchers at the event highlighted the health benefits of a diet rich in whole grains, saying that it can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, as well as various cancers and diabetes.

However, consumption of whole grains in Europe remains very low. This event called on policymakers to support measures that address whole grain policy gaps and encourage the uptake of whole grains into the diet of European citizens.
Whole grain diet can slash risk of cardiovascular disease, says researchers
Whole grains ‘key part of a healthy diet’
Whole Grain Partnership- A unique ‘Stealth Health’ Opportunity
Whole grain diet can slash risk of cardiovascular disease, says researchers

By Natasha Foote | EURACTIV.com

Increasing the daily intake of whole grains to 30-40g reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) by up to 20%, EURACTIV.com heard at a recent event to mark the first International Whole Grain Day.

The event, organised by The Whole Grain Initiative, gathered researchers and policymakers to highlight the positive impact of whole grains on nutrition, wellbeing, and sustainability.

The Whole Grain initiative is a partnership of leading international organisations dedicated to promoting whole grains and are calling on EU

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member states to prioritise whole grain in their national dietary guidelines.

This comes on the back of a growing recognition in policy circles of the need to reduce risk factors associated with CVD.

Recently, the European Parliament committee on environment, public health and food safety (ENVI) has highlighted the need to identify lifestyle factors in the development, treatment and prevention of CVD, which they recognise as a key step in informing policy changes which can help mitigate the risks associated with the development of CVD.

A recent EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet and Health concluded that the consumption of whole grains is a key mitigation factor in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, as well as colorectal cancer and type 2 diabetes.

This study is just one example of a growing body of evidence that the daily consumption of whole grain is a vital part of a healthy and sustainable diet.

LOW CONSUMPTION OF WHOLE GRAINS IN EUROPE

Despite the health benefits of whole grains, their consumption in Europe remains low.

Studies from the EU suggest the majority of Europeans eats less than one serving of whole grain per day, and that only 5% of the grains consumed in Europe are whole.

In an interview after the event, Michaela Pichler, secretary-general of the International Association for Cereal Science and Technology (ICC) told EURACTIV that both the EU and national governments have a key role to play in supporting the implementation of nutrition policies that address policy gaps and create enabling environments to support the uptake of whole grains.

She highlighted, in particular, the need for the creation of a common, global whole grain definition, saying that this common definition is “key to creating a standard and harmonised approach to whole grains across Europe, as well as creating a common understanding of what whole grains are and why they are important”.

Pichler noted that the lack of clear definition was a key barrier to the uptake of whole grains, saying that whilst this was unclear there would “continue to be a large disparity between approaches to whole grains across Europe, making it confusing technically for manufacturers as well as for the consumer”.

She also highlighted the importance of raising awareness of whole grains, saying that there is a “need to help consumers understand the benefits of whole grain, and to give the consumer the fact-based, evidenced knowledge to help them make informed dietary choices”.

Speaking to EURACTIV after the event, Ece Nevra, global nutrition, regulatory and scientific affairs group manager at Cereal Partners Worldwide, said there was a need to incentivise manufacturers to invest in the creation of appetising whole grain products, thus stimulating demand for whole grains.

“There is a real need for the creation of private-public partnerships to enable industry to pass on the benefits of whole grains to consumers”.

This sentiment was echoed by European Affairs Manager for Nestlé Olivera Medugorac, who added that there were a number of concrete policy measures that could help increase uptake of whole grains.

She highlighted, in particular, that there is a need to finalise claims regulation regarding the nutrient profile of whole grains, which she says was due back in 2006 but is yet to be delivered.

“Industry has a lot of power but can only do so much without the policy measures to support them,” Medugorac added.
In an interview with EURACTIV, Michaela Pichler, secretary-general of the International Association for Cereal Science and Technology (ICC), spoke about the importance of whole grains, but also about the lack of industry standards, labelling and promotion of whole grain foods.

Michaela Pichler is the secretary-general of the International Association for Cereal Science and Technology and works with The Whole Grain Initiative, which aims to promote and encourage the uptake of whole grains in Europe.

She spoke to EURACTIV’s Natasha Foote on the sidelines of a recent event to mark the first International Whole Grain Day. The event gathered researchers and policymakers to highlight the positive impact of whole grains on nutrition, wellbeing, and sustainability.

**What are whole grains and why are they important?**

Usually, grains are processed to remove parts of the kernel but whole grains involve the entire, intact kernel after the inedible parts are removed. From a consumer perspective, it is important that the grain stays whole, otherwise it denies the consumer of all the nutrients that are in other parts of the grain.

Today, there is a lot of evidence-based knowledge available which...
clearly shows a positive correlation between whole grain intake and positive health effects, and that whole grains are a key part of a healthy diet.

Currently, the intake of whole grains in Europe is very low, and it differs a lot from country to country. I think this is important to understand why there are these differences. Sometimes it’s culturally based. Many countries are not used to eating them and are reluctant to taste whole grain products.

**What are the main barriers to the adoption of whole grains in the EU?**

I would say the lack of an accepted definition that everybody can refer to in their own regulations and means everyone can start from a common base is one of the biggest barriers.

The Whole Grain working group came already to a conclusion what is whole grain is an ingredient, and now they have started to discuss what is the definition of whole grain food. Currently, this differs a lot. So, for example, there are countries where 70% of whole grain ingredients in a product makes it a whole grain food, while others say it has to be higher.

This is important for setting industry standards and for promoting the results of the consumption of whole grains.

**How can consumers be encouraged to increase their uptake of whole grain?**

Firstly, it’s really important to talk about whole grains with all involved stakeholders. Once people start to speak about whole grains, people then decide to taste them and then, of course, share it with their kids. This is so important because education starts really from day one when kids are very small.

I think it’s on us and everybody in the whole chain, from fork to farm, to share this knowledge in a way that the consumer can easily understand and then can make their own decision. Nobody wants to force anybody to do something. But what we want to do is make the knowledge and data as accessible as possible so consumers can make the best choice. For this, we need to make sure that this information is really based in fact and evidenced.

**What is the role of industry in this?**

Consuming whole grains doesn’t have to be difficult – it can just mean swapping products for whole grain versions. For this, we need industry support to create palatable whole grain products and create consumer demand for whole grains. Ultimately, it’s important to remember that it’s the industry who is the first one that faces the consequences if something fails with the consumers, so we need to work on increasing awareness about whole grains.

**What role can labelling play in the development of incorporating whole grain products?**

Labelling has a really important role in generating trust on the consumer side. With so many different labels we have to be very careful not to overload the consumer with information, so it has to be quick and easy for the consumer to make the best choice.

We should be careful, however, about labelling. For example, if a product has a high whole grain content but a high amount of sugar and fat, this can be an issue. It’s important to be clear that just because there are whole grains, it doesn’t necessarily mean the product is healthy, so this is something that needs to be considered.
The recent EAT-LANCET report emphasised a ‘plant-forward’ diet where whole grains, fruit, vegetables, nuts and legumes comprise a greater proportion of foods consumed, as a means to improve both human health and the health of the planet.

John Athanatos is Head of Nutrition, Regulatory and Scientific Affairs at Cereal Partners Worldwide (CPW). CPW is the maker of Nestle Breakfast Cereals and is a Joint Venture between Nestle and General Mills.

There is a strong (and growing) body of scientific evidence that connects whole grain with a reduced risk of many non-communicable diseases – including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and some cancers.

The recent Global Burden of Diseases study has shown that a poor diet is responsible for more deaths globally than tobacco, high blood pressure, or any other health risk. Low consumption of whole grains was highlighted as on a par with excessive sodium consumption as THE leading dietary factors contributing to this.

Despite this, the consumption of whole grain remains worryingly low.

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In fact, dietary intake studies from various EU countries suggest the majority of Europeans eat significantly less whole grain than recommended.

**HOW CAN WE INCREASE WHOLE GRAIN INTAKES?**

Tuesday 19th of November 2019 marked the first ever International Wholegrain Day. The initiative brought together NGOs, policymakers, the scientific community and industry to draw attention to the need to address the issue of low consumption of whole grain. The event launched a discussion about what we have to do to increase intakes.

Cereal Partners Worldwide was one of the leading industry partners in this initiative. As a company that has invested heavily in making the majority of our portfolio whole grain, we have developed deep insight into consumer attitudes to whole grains and are passionate about helping to increase intakes.

Some of our most recent research was conducted with 16,000 consumers in various countries around the world. Our research suggests that there are 4 main obstacles to consumers choosing whole grain options:

1. There is confusion identifying wholegrain options
2. They don’t fully understand the benefits
3. They don’t think it will taste good
4. They don’t know how much they should be eating

In order to tackle the above, I see roles for Policy Makers, Health Promoters and also the Food Industry.

**THE ROLE OF POLICY MAKERS**

Much of the confusion identifying whole grain options is the result of poor or non-existent regulation for labelling of whole grain foods. Whole grains are not nutrients and so do not come under rules for nutritional labelling.

Any regulation needs to take into account the fact that whole grains are incorporated into food in many different ways, all of which can contribute to overall intakes. In some cases, the grains are more intact (e.g. oatmeal) and can more easily be identified by consumers whilst in others, they are milled and used as flour together with other ingredients (e.g. bread, biscuits, breakfast cereals etc) and can be more difficult to distinguish.

There is a need for a harmonised definition for whole grain, minimum levels of whole grain to be eligible to claim content and other ways to mark the presence of whole grain. As well as helping to identify wholegrain options, this will create incentives for manufacturers to replace refined grain flour with wholegrain flour in their products and avoid misleading consumers.

**THE ROLE OF HEALTH PROMOTERS**

By Health Promoters, I mean public health authorities both at Brussels level as well as at member state level, healthcare professionals and health NGOs. These actors need to help educate the public as to why it is important to consume more whole grain.

We see multiple campaigns focused on goals like increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, reducing sugar and yet very little effort is focused on increasing awareness of whole grains and their benefits.

I also believe introducing an easily understood target for people to aim for, could greatly improve the messaging. For example, the ‘5 portions of fruit&veg’ introduced in some countries have created a tangible and achievable goal to promote to populations. The US dietary guidelines suggest eating at least six servings of foods that contain a minimum of eight grams of whole grain to help reach the daily intake recommendation of 48g. Most EU countries do not have a quantitative recommendation as part of their dietary guidelines. This should be a priority.

**THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY**

As manufacturers, we are able to increase the supply of whole grain options. We have the technology and the know-how to use whole grain flours in place of refined grain. We can innovate to bring new whole grain products to market that meet consumer’s taste expectations.

It is also important to recognise the role that reformulation can play here. We can reformulate existing products to replace refined flour with whole grain flour. This can be a form of ‘stealth health’ in that consumers increase their whole grain intake whilst continuing to enjoy the products they love.

Many manufacturers are also in the midst of reformulating to reduce sugar. What most people overlook is that in dry products the space occupied by sugar has to be replaced with something else. Typically this will be refined flour, starch or other sweeteners which is not really improving the carbohydrate quality of the food.

When manufacturers undertake sugar reductions they should look at replacing the sugar with wholegrain flour. For example, we are proud that over the last 15 years at Nestle Breakfast Cereals we have reduced sugar by over 20% across the portfolio. In the process, we have been able to replace much of that sugar with wholegrain flour.

One important point I would like to make is that incorporating whole grain flour instead of refined grain flour...
comes at a cost for a manufacturer. It creates technical issues with taste and texture, it reduces shelf life and creates more complexity in sourcing and quality control.

If we want to encourage more manufacturers to use whole grains we need to create incentives through appropriate labelling and communication possibilities, or by giving credit in Nutrient Profiling systems. For example, the NutriScore system that is becoming more widespread within the EU rewards the presence of fruits and vegetables, but not whole grains.

**PARTNERSHIP IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO INCREASE WHOLE GRAIN INTAKES**

I hope that what I have illustrated is how interconnected and overlapping the roles of the different actors are when it comes to improving wholegrain intakes.

It, therefore, should be no surprise that the very few examples we have of successful initiatives to increase whole grain consumption have come from effective Public-Private Partnerships.

In particular, the one most often cited as a best practice is the Danish Whole Grain Partnership. As a result of this collaboration between government, NGOs and industry, in less than a decade, the average whole grain intake of Danes increased from 36 to 63 g/10 MJ/day.

There is a clear need and opportunity both at EU level and within member states to create more of these types of partnerships, to help boost whole grain intakes and improve the carbohydrate quality in the diet. What role could the EU institutions play to facilitate this?

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, if we want people to increase their whole grain consumption and reduce their refined grain consumption we need to: tell them why, how and how much. And give them options they can clearly identify and that they will love. If we work together, through whole grain we can improve the health of EU citizens as well as the health of the planet.
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