Wholegrains: Key for ‘whole’-istic food systems approach

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Between Russia’s invasion of Ukraine upending global food systems and the COVID-19 pandemic, the past few years have served as a harsh reminder of the need for a resilient, sustainable, and healthy food system.

A growing body of evidence suggests that whole grain foods can play an important role in the creation of this, as they offer a win-win situation for both health and the environment.

In this Event Report, EURACTIV explores the potential of whole grains for tackling the challenges facing our food and health systems.
Wholegrain-rich diet lifeline for struggling health systems, experts say

How whole grain can help make the world a better place
Wholegrain-rich diet lifeline for struggling health systems, experts say

By Natasha Foote | euractiv.com

The promotion of a diet rich in whole grains should play a crucial part in strategies designed to safeguard struggling healthcare systems, experts have stressed, emphasising their role in preventing major non-communicable diseases.

The COVID-19 pandemic left global healthcare systems reeling – and, between the rise of superbugs and ageing populations, pressures are unlikely to ease on the health sector any time soon.

This leaves a big question mark over ways to ensure the economic viability of healthcare systems in the future.

For Janne Martikainen, health economist and professor of pharmacoeconomics at the University of Eastern Finland, the key is to emphasise preventative measures more strongly.

“We need a solution to increase the sustainability of healthcare systems, and whole grains are one solution for that,” one expert stressed in a recent event. [SHUTTERSTOCK]
championing the need to focus on a holistic approach which factors in the true costs of care.

And according to experts, the answer to this could partly lie in our diet – specifically, in the consumption of whole grains.

Whole grains are any type of grain that has not been refined, and instead retains and includes the entire kernel. These types of grains are more nutrient-dense than refined grains and offer a host of environmental and health benefits, panellists said.

Despite strong evidence pointing to the health benefits of whole grains, their uptake across the EU remains low.

The EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy, highlights that while consumption of red meat, sugars, salt and fats continues to exceed recommendations, consumption of whole-grain cereals is ‘insufficient’.

“We need a solution to increase the sustainability of healthcare systems, and whole grains are one solution for that,” Martikainen said, stressing that they hold “great potential to support the sustainability of the healthcare system”.

This is because the rich nutritional value of whole grains has been found to help lower the risk of major non-communicable diseases, they explained.

“Based on the evidence that we know, when we increase the wholegrain intake, we are able to reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases, type two diabetes and certain types of cancers,” Martikainen said.

Likewise, Roberto Volpe, medical researcher and representative of the Italian Society for Cardiovascular Prevention (SIPREC) at the European Heart Network (EHN) pointed to a recent meta-analysis which concluded that only an additional 50 grams per 1000 kilocalories of whole grains per day were found to reduce cardiovascular mortality by up to 20% and cancer mortality by 12% cancer mortality around 12%.

“Just with a spoon of whole grain, we could fight so many diseases,” he stressed.

Meanwhile, Kelly LeBlanc, director of nutrition at the Whole Grains Council, added that because whole grains are more nutrient-dense, they give us a “bigger nutritional bang for our buck.”

This is good news both for environmental and human health, she pointed out.

“So when we’re trying to decide how to maximise every parcel of land for the greatest nutritional outcome, prioritising whole grains is a no-brainer, as they help us better meet our nutrient needs,” she concluded.

And, thanks to the relative cheapness of whole grains, this is also a solution that works globally, according to Saskia De Pee, chief analytics for science for food and nutrition at the World Food Programme (WFP).

Pointing out that as many as three billion people worldwide cannot afford a healthy diet, De Pee stressed that fortifying staple foodstuffs can be a cost-effective and culturally appropriate way to ensure the worlds poorest have access to healthy and diverse diets.

“There are some really beautiful examples from around the world of whole grains,” she said, citing historical examples from India and Ethiopia and stressing the need to encourage communities to return to traditional eating patterns to increase the consumption of whole grains.
Governments are united in their wish for more people to eat more whole grain. But how? The Whole Grain Initiative puts forward three simple policy changes that could make all the difference.

**A spark of hope as we move to permacrisis**

If the last two years have taught us anything, it’s how fragile and illogical the world around us is. We came through the other side of the COVID-19 crisis only to be hit by more challenges – war in Europe, economic and political instability across the world, and a rising cost of living.

But with adversity, comes resilience. While all these crises have had massive knock-on effects on our food systems – with disruption to supply chains, higher prices of production, and higher prices on shelves – governments remain steadfast in their commitment to ensure people have access to the nutritious food they need to live healthy and active lives.

The latest Global Burden of Disease survey (2019) suggests that every year nearly 8 million people die due to poor diet. Other studies suggest that eating too many unhealthy foods and not enough healthy foods (such as whole grains) may be the cause of one in every five deaths globally.

With a growing population and the detrimental impact agriculture has on the environment (agriculture alone is responsible for up to 30% of greenhouse gases), governments...
do have a challenge ahead of them, though. How can they provide nutritious and affordable food, while ensuring they reduce their impact on the world around them?

Luckily, governments have an unexpected ally waiting in the wings to support them: whole grain.

Naturally nutritious and environmentally friendly, whole grain is the ideal choice for budget and health-conscious consumers.

We just need to get more people eating it.

**Whole grain: the unsung superhero**

There are many and varied reasons why people don’t eat enough whole grain. Sometimes it’s a question of not knowing what whole grain is, or not liking the taste. Others may find whole grain products more expensive, or simply don’t know how to cook with it and so don’t buy it. Most of the time, however, the reticence around whole grain comes down to a lack of understanding — of what it is, what its benefits are, how it can help us play a part in slowing down climate change.

It doesn’t take much for whole grain to start making a difference. Even a small amount more in our diets each day can have a marked benefit on our health. Studies suggest that, by eating more whole grain, you’re putting yourself at lower risk from getting heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

And if we as a population are getting healthier, this means so are governments’ balance sheets. Fewer people getting ill means less strain on healthcare systems and budgets. There is a huge amount of research that’s already been done which shows that if we can get people eating even a little more whole grain, it can have a significant impact on the bottom line.

• In Australia, increased whole grain consumption could lead to annual healthcare cost savings of up to 1.4 billion AUS, enough to build five hospitals.
• Finland could save about 1 billion EUR over 10 years from reduced type 2 diabetes-related costs, or the cost of 7,000 playgrounds.
• The US government could save up to USD 35.9 billion due to reduced cardiovascular and coronary heart events, the equivalent of 15,000 high schools.

And it’s not just the economy that would benefit from increased whole grain consumption — it’s better for the planet, too. Grains have one of the lowest carbon footprints of all food groups. Producing a kilogram of beef emits 60 kilograms (kg) of greenhouse gases (or CO2-equivalents) across the supply chain. Producing the same amount of wheat or rye produces only 1.4 kg.

If governments want to safeguard budgets as well as the environment, encouraging more people to eat more whole grain seems to be the easy answer. So how do we do that?

**Three simple policy steps**

Here, at the Whole Grain Initiative, we believe there are three simple things governments can, and should, do to increase whole grain consumption.

1. **Make whole grain count.**

Whole grain, for all the positive benefits it has on health, isn’t currently part of most national dietary guidelines. Despite most countries and health organisations acknowledging we need to eat more whole grain, there is no agreement or consistency in what constitutes whole grain and how much we should eat each day. If we’re to support consumers, we need to have clarity and consistency on definitions and quantitative recommendations.

2. **Highlight whole grain through front-of-pack labels.** Front-of-pack labels (such as Nutri-Score, the traffic-light system, the Health Star Rating) have proven very effective at helping consumers pick and eat healthier food. However, they don’t currently include whole grain as part of their nutrient profiling systems. Given the proven health benefits of whole grain, it would make sense to include them as part of this rating.

3. **Help people understand what whole grain is.** Develop new public-private partnerships to run consumer educational programs and marketing campaigns about whole grain — explaining what it is, how to find it, and why it’s important to eat more.

On 15th November 2022, we will join experts in nutrition and sustainability from around the world in celebrating the 4th Annual International Whole Grain Day. At 15:30pm CET, we will host a webinar exploring why whole grain matters for the whole world. Guest speakers (including representatives from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), and the European Food Information Council) will discuss the importance of whole grain in creating healthier, more sustainable and resilient food systems, worldwide. To register for the webinar, visit our website wholegraininitiative.org

The Whole Grain Initiative is a partnership of leading experts and organisations dedicated to promoting whole grain. Find out more at wholegraininitiative.org
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