

Response to consultation

EU call for evidence on the EU Cardiovascular Health Plan

Why it matters to consumers

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the largest cause of sickness and morbidity in Europe, and a leading cause of death and premature mortality. A healthier diet is essential to maintain low levels of cholesterol, the right blood pressure, and for the overall heart health. European policies should thus make sure that the ‘healthy choice is the easy choice’ for all European consumers.

Current food systems are yet failing European consumers, as foods that are high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) and ultra processed (UPF) are still the cheapest and most available option. A European Cardiovascular Health Plan should promote policies – as the ones listed below - that facilitate European consumers in accessing foods like fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and plant proteins. Therefore, creating a healthier food system can prevent millions of cases of heart disease, reduce healthcare costs, and the quality of life for millions of European consumers.

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BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation, thanks the Commission for the opportunity to provide feedback to this call for evidence. We welcome the Commission's initiative to tackle cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), the leading cause of death in the European Union, through prevention measures, early detection and treatment, as well as innovation.

In our response, we would like to focus on the fundamental role a healthier food system could have in preventing CVDs at population level. Unhealthy diets are defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as: "One that is energy-dense and high in free sugars, saturated fats, trans fats, and/or sodium, while being low in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and dietary fiber." On top of this, literature is now clear that a diet rich in ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is also problematic, because these foods are typically energy-dense, poor in micronutrients, and high in added sugars, unhealthy fats, and sodium.

Unhealthy diets are strongly linked to chronic diseases such as hypertension, heart failure, and atherosclerosis, among others. On the contrary, healthier diets, namely those which ensure an adequate intake of fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, nuts and fish, while also moderating the consumption of foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) and UPFs, have proven to be highly beneficial in preventing CVDs. According to the WHO, over 75% of premature CVDs are preventable if risk factors, such as diets, are tackled.

The problem is that European food systems do not make "the healthy choice the easy choice" as default for EU consumers, rather the opposite. HFSS and UPF foods are still more accessible, cheaper, and better marketed. On the contrary, local and healthier foods are still too expensive, more difficult to access and less marketed.

To change European food systems, policymaking can no longer rely on interventions focused on individual behaviours, while neglecting the problem's systemic roots. Instead, it is necessary to implement mandatory policies focused on promoting healthier foods, while limiting the consumption of unhealthy options.

These are BEUC's key recommendations on how to improve our food systems to reduce the rates of CVDs:

BEUC RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Make healthier foods more available**
There is major potential in making the healthier option more available. To do so, measures include implementing lower or 0% VAT on fruit, vegetables, legumes and whole grains, while also providing direct subsidies for their purchases.
- 2 Help food production transition to healthier products**
Transition to healthier food system must be incentivised from farm to fork. On the farm side, the Common Agricultural Policy and other European agricultural funds have great potential to facilitate farmers shifting towards a healthier food production.

Use the full potential of public food procurement

3

Public settings are key in granting people can access healthy food. Schools are of course the main setting to consider, as interventions in early stages of life guarantee long-term benefits for children. However, this should be expanded to all workplaces, hospitals and public canteens, so that the whole population can access healthier and local foods in these settings.

Regulate marketing of unhealthy food

4

There should be a specific focus on protecting children, including adolescents, through an EU-wide ban on advertising of HFSS. However, the rest of the population should not be neglected, with specific attention for socioeconomic inequalities. Hence, regulating marketing both online and offline can reduce the consumption of HFSS and UPFs across the whole population.

Reformulate and provide clear information on the label

5

Specific thresholds for salt, sugar and saturated fats can guarantee that foods arrive healthier at the food retailer. The WHO offers precise guidelines for how to reformulate foods which should be followed. Moreover, front-of-package nutritional labels, such as Nutri-Score, have proved to help consumers access healthier foods while incentivising producers to reformulate their products.

These are some key policies that should be implemented to achieve healthier European food systems that would help tackle CVDs. These policies would improve the health of all European consumers, but it is necessary to stress that there are significant inequalities related to CVDs. Lower income and wealth, lower levels of education, unemployment, living in deprived neighbourhoods, psychosocial stress, etc., are all factors that worsen the incidence of CVDs. Therefore, a holistic approach is necessary to specifically address the social determinants of unhealthy diets.

Improving European food systems through a targeted EU Cardiovascular Health Plan is a necessary measure to make sure EU policies prevent a significant number of deaths and of years lived with disability, but it also a matter of fairness and equity to make sure that all European consumers' health is granted and maximised.