

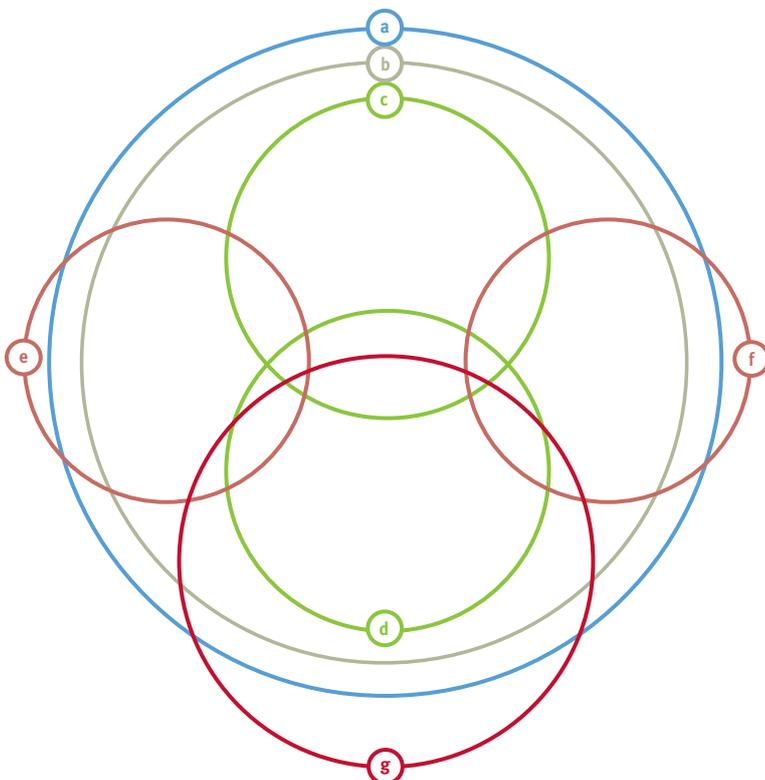


Time constraints and social dynamics influence our eating habits

Within the scope of NRP 69, a team of researchers has investigated how a transition towards healthy and sustainable eating in Switzerland could be encouraged. It examined dietary recommendations, food consumption and the consequences of nutrition for human health and a sustainable environment. The results show that eating habits are determined mainly by the time available, mobility and regular commuting, as well as different stages in life. Healthy and sustainable eating is best promoted by recommending certain kinds of food rather than by pointing out which foodstuffs should be avoided.

Consumers in Switzerland are paying more and more attention to what they eat, either for health reasons or to protect the planet. How can we support this transition to a healthy and sustainable diet? A research team participating in NRP 69 has studied this question; the team members are from the universities of Lausanne and

Geneva, from Quantis – a company specialising in sustainability solutions – and from EPF Lausanne. The researchers examined current recommendations for a healthy and sustainable diet in Switzerland as well as existing food supply and consumption practices. In addition, they analysed the consequences of specific diets for health and the environment. Based on this comprehensive analysis, they recommended measures to facilitate the transition to a healthy and sustainable food system.



Dominant prescriptions around “healthy and sustainable” diets in Switzerland, and their tensions and overlaps

- a) Eating as a pleasure
- b) Balanced diet (Swiss Food Pyramid)
- c) Natural and organic diets
- d) Local and seasonal diets
- e) Less of better meat consumption
- f) Vegetarian and vegan diets
- g) Slimming diets

Many and varied recommendations

To better understand which diets are regarded as healthy and sustainable in Switzerland, the research team took a look at the most important dietary recommendations. It grouped these guidelines and best practices under seven categories, illustrating overlaps and tensions between recommendations with the help of a diagram (see graphic page 1). This revealed how large the variety of existing recommendations is and how this can confuse consumers or influence their behaviour.

Most of the recommendations are aimed at promoting health, and only a few concern the environment. The majority of the Swiss population can identify with the principles of keeping a balanced diet (in harmony with the food pyramid) and enjoying one's food. For a diet that is both healthy and sustainable, eating local products is also increasingly recommended – even if the meaning of "local" is not always clearly defined.

Importance of time and mobility

The analysis shows that knowing and approving of recommendations does not necessarily mean that they will be implemented. In interviews and group discussions, along with a survey, the researchers identified the key factors influencing the eating habits of Swiss households. Not enough time for shopping, cooking and eating is the primary reason why so many do not follow the recommendations. In households with sufficient financial resources, the rhythm of daily life affects nutrition more strongly than the question of money. Commuting, and by extension the food for sale between the home and the workplace, are also a factor. Finally, people's diets are influenced by societal developments and life stages. For example, people who eat alone have different diets from people who cook for their children. To change Swiss eating habits, most of these elements will need to be considered.

The results also show that the will to eat healthier is more often put into practice than the desire to contribute to a sustainable environment.

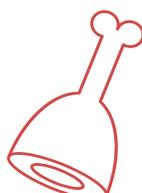
For healthy nutrition



- whole grains
- fruits and vegetables
- nuts and seeds



- processed meat
- alcohol
- sodium



For ecologically sustainable consumption



- whole grains
- seasonal fruits and vegetables
- pulses
- nuts and seeds



- meat products
- all drinks except tap water (e.g. coffee)

Effects on health and the environment

How does nutrition affect health and the environment? In order to answer this question, the research team used life-cycle analysis to assess the consequences of different diets identified in the national MenuCH study. A large share of the environmental impact is due to the consumption of meat-based products. Vegetarian or vegan diets result in lower CO₂ emissions. However, the latter still lie above one tonne of CO₂ per person per year – the threshold defined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals to limit global warming. Attempts to reduce meat consumption should be prioritised in the future. But measures should also be planned at the food production level: for instance, refraining from fossil fuel or animal fodder imports from countries where forests are being cut down.

Further information:
www.nrp69.ch

The negative health effects are mainly attributable to the overconsumption of processed meat, and not enough whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. Some diets also contain too much sodium. This is particularly the case with bread and biscuits. Instead of pointing out what consumers shouldn't eat, the research group recommends promoting foodstuffs that are beneficial to both health and the environment and could replace those that are not recommended. Accordingly, consumers in Switzerland should be reminded to eat more whole grains, seasonal fruits and vegetables, and nuts and seeds.

Recommendations

Three ways to facilitate the transition to healthy and sustainable diets

The researchers recommended the following three measures to support the transition to a healthier and more sustainable food system:

1. Establishing a Swiss food policy forum: this would help to interconnect the various sectors of the food system, such as agriculture, transport, urban planning, health, security, etc. All aspects of production, distribution and consumption that are relevant to health and sustainability could then be taken into account.
2. Devising political strategies that are guided by practice: nutrition policies should be developed in context and guided by developments in society that shape eating habits. Where and how is food produced, prepared and consumed? The potential of particular life events as turning points in the transition to new eating habits should also be considered in this context.
3. Encouraging instead of banning: it would be better to focus on encouraging people to eat healthy and environmentally sound products instead of telling them which foodstuffs they should avoid.