

EFSA to advise on added sugar intake

By Sara Lewis

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The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) is to advise on intake of added sugar, following a joint request for an opinion from Denmark, Finland, Sweden and non-EU Iceland and Norway.

In a statement, EFSA said it “aims to establish a science-based cut-off value for daily exposure to added sugars from all sources which is not associated with adverse health effects” in the opinion which is scheduled for early 2020.

“Added sugars from all sources comprise sucrose, fructose, glucose, starch hydrolysates such as glucose syrup, high-fructose syrup, and other sugar preparations consumed as such or added during food preparation and manufacturing,” the statement explained, adding: “The adverse health effects under consideration will include body weight, glucose intolerance and insulin sensitivity, type-2-diabetes, cardiovascular risk factors, as well as dental caries.”

The assessment will consider the effects in the “general healthy population, including children, adolescents, adults and the elderly.”

The advice will help EU Member States and other countries when setting recommendations for the consumption of added sugars and in planning food-based dietary guidelines.

Sweden is coordinating the request to EFSA on behalf of the five Nordic countries. Annica Sohlström, the Director General of the Swedish National Food Agency, commented: “We welcome EFSA’s acceptance of the mandate which reflects the need to scientifically evaluate the links between added sugar and health at a European level.”

EFSA will now set up an ad-hoc working group with expertise in dietary exposure, epidemiology, human nutrition, diet-related chronic diseases and dentistry. The five Nordic countries behind the mandate will be invited to the working group as observers.

The statement said that EFSA will use its established methodology to develop a protocol for the assessment: “Known as Prometheus – PROMoting METHods for Evidence Use in Scientific assessments – the method shows how EFSA selects evidence, how this evidence contributes to the risk assessment and how EFSA reports on the entire process and its results.”

EFSA pledges to work with ‘stakeholders’ – so the food and drinks industry, non-governmental organisations, academics and regulators - throughout the assessment process. Two public consultations are planned to gain feedback, first on the draft protocol in the first half of 2018, then on the draft opinion in late 2019. The second consultation will also involve a face-to-face meeting with stakeholders.

In 2010, EFSA published an opinion on Dietary Reference Values (DRVs) for carbohydrates and dietary fibre, which also included sugar. The statement notes: “At

this time, the available evidence was insufficient to set an upper limit for the daily intake of total or added sugars.” But since then new scientific evidence has emerged and there has been growing public interest in the health effects of consuming sugary foods and drinks.

New scientific evidence

Sohlström’s [letter](#) to EFSA Executive Director Bernhard Url mandating the Authority to start the work, notes that “Several EU Member States and international organisations have previously found scientific basis for setting a dietary recommendation for added sugars to a maximum of 10% of total energy intake.”

It goes on to point to recently published scientific evidence “supporting efficacy of limiting intake of added sugars” and asks EFSA to assess “if a dietary reference value for sugar with particular attention to added sugar can now be set.”

The letter notes that EFSA’s 2010 opinion was based on studies published up to 2009 and says that since then several organisations have published reports reviewing later studies, giving as key examples the 2012 Nordic Nutrition Recommendation (NNR), the World Health Organisation (WHO) 2015 guidance, the British Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SCAN) recommendations also from 2015 plus the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015 to 2020. It says all include published research not covered in the EFSA opinion and all have set dietary recommendations for added sugar, mainly to keep it below 10% of energy (calorie) intake. Both the WHO and SACN recommend reducing added sugars to below 5% of total energy intake.

SAFE says explain added sugar

Safe Food Advocacy Europe (SAFE) welcomed the move but called on EFSA to explain the difference between natural and added sugar.

SAFE Secretary General Floriana Cimmarusti told ***EU Food Law***: “SAFE highly welcomes EFSA’s initiative to scrutinize all types of sugar and their effects on health. Indeed, the distinction between natural sugar and free sugar has to be better explained and visible in order to inform the consumers about the hazardousness of free sugar.”

Cimmarusti continued: “We believe that the important and independent studies of the World Health Organization (WHO) and their recommendation of daily sugar intake to not consume more than 12 teaspoons a day for adults should be considered carefully.”

She flagged up a study carried out in the Italian hospital Bambino Gesù last year which analysed 271 overweight children with a high-fructose diet and concluded that 37.6% of the children had a fatty liver due to their daily sugar consumption.

Cimmarusti also highlighted research from Queensland University showing that sugar can be addictive to call on the food industry to cut hidden sugar in food. The study “demonstrated that between sugar and cocaine rats orientate themselves towards sugar. Consequently, the food industry should reduce the excessive quantities of sugar they put in food products in which we could not even assume they contain added sugar like tomato sauce.”