Joint Collaboration of

PAS GRAS

Preventia
Preventing diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular diseases

Healthy eating starts long before the first bite: how PAS GRAS and PREVENTIA are connecting research, innovation and civil society

From the research evidence in health and the local production and markets to the promotion of healthy school food environments, two EU-funded projects are joining efforts to better support affordable healthy and high-quality sustainable food choices to European families.

What does it take to make healthy eating an everyday choice? Beyond individual decisions, our food choices are shaped by the environments we live in, the information we receive and the food affordance. Recognising these influences, **PAS GRAS** and **PREVENTIA** are joining efforts to promote healthier food choices that benefit both people and the planet's health.

"Obesity prevention starts long before health problems emerge. It begins with the environments we live in, the food we have access to and the habits we develop from an early age. Our goal is to turn validated scientific knowledge into practical solutions that help individuals and communities build healthier lives," states Paulo Oliveira, PAS GRAS coordinator.

The need for action is clear. Around one in four children aged 7 to 9 in Europe live with overweight or obesity, yet fewer than half eat fresh fruit every day and only around a third eat vegetables daily. Childhood obesity often follows people into adulthood, raising the risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and other non-communicable diseases.

From farm to fork: where research meets consumer needs

Many factors shape what we eat long before food reaches our plates, from food production and processing to labelling, commercial determinants and the wider food system, including the products available in shops. Our choices, in turn, affect both our health and the environment. What if we considered both when making food choices? The two projects address different stages of this journey from farm to consumer, and their approaches are highly complementary.

PAS GRAS provides scientific evidence on how food choices and lifestyle habits are translated into metabolic health and disease throughout life, while PREVENTIA makes sure this knowledge reaches consumers through clear information, practical tools and activities targeting vulnerable groups. Together, these projects bridge research, innovation and civil society towards healthier and more sustainable food choices for the people and the planet.

Through the EU Booster programme, the two teams have been comparing notes on shared priorities: diversification of protein resources (plant, fungi) and minimally processed foods inspired by the Mediterranean diet, less salt, sugar and food waste, and practical activities that bring healthy eating to children, families and vulnerable groups.

"Consumers can only make healthy choices when nutritious food is available, affordable and clearly labelled. Our work aims to enhance food literacy, particularly among vulnerable consumers who are disproportionately affected by health inequalities" says Cecilia D'Acunto, PREVENTIA coordinator.

Culinary medicine: "Let food be the medicine"

Coordinated by the University of Coimbra, PAS GRAS brings together partners from eight European countries from 2023 to 2028. PAS GRAS studies how nutrition, physical activity, mental health, family, socio-economic factors and environmental exposures shape the risk of obesity in children, adolescents and young adults, with the aim of developing more effective and personalised prevention strategies.

Some of the research comes through and is translated via a culinary medicine framework with children, adolescents, young adults, patients, using and creating Mediterranean-inspired recipes featuring ingredients such as za'atar and mushroom-based flour, from za'atar hummus and mushroom biscuits to mushrooms and plant-based burgers.

"People will eat better if healthy high-quality food is affordable and easy to prepare. Our approach through the culinary medicine framework shows how evidence through science can actually end with you cooking and innovating at home." says Anabela Marisa Azul, PAS GRAS co-coordinator.

Behind these recipes is fundamental research into bioactive compounds naturally found in Mediterranean foods, which early studies suggest may support metabolic health. The team is also investigating how these compounds, when consumed during pregnancy and breastfeeding, may influence children's metabolic health later in life, with preliminary findings suggesting potential benefits.

Because every person responds differently to food and lifestyle changes, the project is also developing personalised nutritional approaches for people with overweight and obesity, combining the Mediterranean diet, physical activity and innovative nutritional solutions. A consortium-wide Nutrition task force is designing practical, evidence-based recommendations that can be adapted to individual needs. The broader ambition is a *healthy exposome*: shaping the everyday exposures, from the food we produce and eat to our environment and lifestyle, that support well-being throughout life.

Supporting consumers to choose better nutritional foods

PREVENTIA's results show that food literacy can be put into practice. Its BiteWatch® app already has more than 11,500 users, its school sessions have reached 660 children in

disadvantaged communities, and its "Around My Kitchen Table" initiative has brought together 107 migrants to cook and learn about healthy eating.

Running from 2024 to 2026, PREVENTIA brings together SAFE, consumer organisations from Croatia, Greece, Italy and Lithuania, and Promote Ukraine to strengthen food literacy, reduce health inequalities and help prevent non-communicable diseases. Its best-known result is the BiteWatch® app, a free tool that helps consumers understand food products and make more informed choices, available across all EU Member States in five languages. Through SAFE, the project also brings the consumer perspective to EU policy, calling for clearer food information and legislation that better protects the most vulnerable.

This connection lies at the heart of both projects. After all, healthier foods and nutritional strategies only translate into better health outcomes when people can recognise them, trust the information provided and afford to include them in their daily lives.

Learning together: co-producing well-targeted healthy sustainable food choices messages

For both projects, food literacy is about more than information: it means creating opportunities to explore, question, experience and apply what we learn.

PREVENTIA's school sessions used inclusive, participatory activities in Croatia, Greece, Lithuania and Italy, while "Around My Kitchen Table" invited migrants, including Ukrainians under temporary protection, to cook and share traditional meals while talking about healthy nutrition.

In Coimbra, Portugal, PAS GRAS translates children's preferences, perception, and knowledge about food into action in a place where healthy food choices may be made every day: the local market. Together with the Coimbra City Council, PAS GRAS is developing a community based program "Mercado, Eu Vou e Aprendo" ("Food market, I will learn to find my healthy treasures"), key for sensory, social, and cognitive development. The program comprises mensal ateliers for children and their families at the D. Pedro V municipal market from October 2026 to June 2027, starting with 'Mushrooms from Farm to Fork'. Children explore textures, smells, flavours, understand where food comes from and the origin of the Mediterranean diet, learn how to count and pay. Moreover, children learn to cook and comprehend the meaning of balanced eating also connecting with biodiversity preservation and environmental sustainability. This initiative will be geared to be replicated in other partners.

As Heloísa Gerardo, PAS GRAS communication and exploitation manager explains: *"One of the pillars of PAS GRAS is to bring science, health and sustainability into everyday life from an early age."*

The collective efforts of families, schools, market traders, local authorities, academia, and other sectors of society, intends to make the local-based food systems the basis for promoting healthier sustainable eating diets, and support effective childhood obesity prevention.

Turning research into coherent policies and reliable impact

The collaboration shows how different approaches can serve a shared goal. Research supports safe, healthy, high-quality and sustainable food; consumer advocacy improves access to reliable information; and community engagement brings these insights into homes, schools, markets and coherent policies to reliable impact.

The work does not stay here, only. For PAS GRAS, which runs until 2028, the team has been actively involved in guiding new EU strategic approaches, such as the participation in Food 2040 stakeholder workshop (25 March 2026) and the OBEClust (the European Cluster of Obesity Research Projects. Moreover, the PAS GRAS campaign is developing synergies among all sectors in society in and beyond Europe. For PREVENTIA, the end of the funded project opens a new phase, in which its tools, resources and partnerships can continue to support schools and local organisations.

The next step is in Brussels on 18 November 2026, when PREVENTIA presents its main achievements at its Final Event, held as part of SAFE's 2026 Annual Conference, "Consumers Come First: Clearer Food Information and Rethinking EU Food Legislation for the Most Vulnerable".

"We look forward to welcoming key stakeholders to PREVENTIA's final event in Brussels, where we will showcase the project's activities and results. The event will also provide an opportunity to foster debate and strengthen networks among key stakeholders across the food and health sectors," says Cecilia D'Acunto, PREVENTIA coordinator.

It will be a chance to see how science, consumers and communities can work together to make the healthy choice the easy choice for every family in Europe. In-person participation requires registration through the conference website.

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