



Fruit and  
vegetables  
a healthy  
life choice



# **“FRUIT & VEG 4 HEALTH” PROGRAMME: THE RESULTS AFTER THREE YEARS OF ACTION**

After three years of concrete steps targeting health professionals, the European programme “Fruit & Veg 4 Health” presented its results at an online event which took place on November, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020. It was co-chaired by Prof. Elio Riboli (Imperial College London) and Prof. Martine Laville (Claude-Bernard University Lyon 1). The event was also an opportunity to identify ways to optimise this initiative and think about how to extend it to other European countries.

## **LESSONS FROM THE EGEA CONFERENCES (ACTION 1)**

The EGEA conferences, organised by Aprifel for nearly 20 years under the permanent chairmanship of Prof. Elio Riboli, have confirmed the indisputable role of a healthy diet, rich in fruit and vegetables, in preventing a number of chronic diseases. However, they have also revealed that the consumption of fruit and vegetables does not meet recommended guidelines and chronic diseases are still on the rise.

It was time to translate this science into practice and this was placed at the heart of the latest EGEA conference in 2018. Information and training sessions based on international consensus and nutritional knowledge was the first action of the innovative European programme “Fruit and Veg 4 Health” (2018-2020), co-financed by the European Union and coordinated by Aprifel, the Agency for Research and Information on Fruit and Vegetables, and Interfel, the Interprofession of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables. The conference brought together close to 300 participants: international researchers, health professionals, policymakers, civil society stakeholders and fruit and veg industry professionals. The conclusions from EGEA 2018, a challenge that called for the input of all stakeholders, were the following:

- Given current scientific knowledge, it is imperative to change eating habits and increase fruit and vegetable consumption, particularly among young people.
- Health professionals have a key role to play, and to enable this:
  - A dialogue should be established between patient and doctor and include advice on lifestyle and diet
  - Medical training should be reviewed to incorporate theoretical and practical knowledge on nutrition
  - To facilitate collaboration between doctors and dieticians, a better mutual understanding of the professions and new reimbursement policies for consultations are needed.
- Schools and their communities should enable children to adopt healthy eating habits
- Food systems should be improved for both people and the planet so that the healthy choice becomes the easiest one.

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# THE SCIENCE BEHIND “FRUIT & VEG 4 HEALTH”

## THE BENEFITS OF FRUIT AND VEGETABLES HAVE BEEN SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN

### › On human health

*“If we want to reduce premature mortality, this calls for a combination of interventions that go well beyond medicine and involve **regulations, changes to the environment** and, without a doubt, implications for the **economy**. However, fruit and vegetables are a considerable and accessible asset that contributes to improving public health and promoting a healthy lifestyle”* confirms **Elio Riboli**, Professor in Epidemiology and Cancer Prevention at Imperial College London, and Permanent Chair of EGEA.

Furthermore, systematic literature reviews report the role of fruit and vegetable consumption in reducing all-cause mortality and the risk of coronary heart disease, cardiovascular diseases and some cancers.

But to promote their consumption, starting early is key, especially in the first 1,000 days of life, i.e. from conception to two years of age. *“Flavour plays a key role in shaping future eating habits and we know that the foetus and infant are exposed to the flavour profiles of food consumed by the mother through amniotic fluid and breast milk,”* explains **Daniel Weghuber**, Paediatrician and President of ECOG.

### › On the planet

Fruit and vegetable consumption can also help tackle the main environmental challenges. *“By increasing our fruit and vegetable consumption in line with recommended dietary guidelines and decreasing the amount of animal-based products, we can reduce greenhouse gases,”* highlights **Christian Reynolds**, Sustainable Food Expert (City, University of London). These changes can already be seen in the United Kingdom with new generations consuming more fruit and vegetables than previous generations<sup>1</sup>.

## THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT MARKETING PLAYS A ROLE IN OUR FOOD CHOICES AND WE SHOULD HARNESS THIS POWER

Food marketing mainly promotes food that should be consumed only occasionally and it successfully increases its consumption by being almost everywhere in the media and on social media with endorsements by celebrities. *“These food marketing methods are avenues to be explored to help promote fruit and vegetable consumption, especially among children,”* observes **Frans Folkvord**, Lecturer in Behavioural Science at Tilburg University (the Netherlands), where he is currently studying the feasibility and effectiveness of the same model for promoting a healthy diet.

## NUTRITION SHOULD BE A PRIORITY IN MEDICAL TRAINING

Nutrition should be a priority in medical training given it is a mortality and disease risk factor. *“One in five deaths worldwide is associated with poor diet,”* points out **Mathilde Touvier**, Director of Research at the EREN. Not to mention that the general public has so many sources of information available, some being questionable to say the least. What’s more, there are many food beliefs and they are not all based on fact. *“Doctors therefore have a key role to play as a source of reliable information, as long as they have been given training on recommended national dietary guidelines and on the advice to give to achieve this,”* she adds.

<sup>1</sup> National Food Survey 1974-2000 (UK), Living Cost and Food Survey 2000-2018 (UK)

# "FRUIT & VEG 4 HEALTH": FROM SCIENCE TO PRACTICE (ACTIONS 2, 3 AND 4)

## ACTIONS TARGETING THE GENERAL PUBLIC AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Several recent studies from France and Europe have shown that the doctor-patient relationship is based on trust, with patients expecting nutritional advice from their doctor. However, general practitioners need the tools and information to enable them to fulfil this role.

The **"Fruit and Veg 4 Health"** programme had two complementary aims to create a virtuous cycle for patients and health professionals.

The 2018 EGEA conference also stressed the importance of continuing to promote fruit and vegetable consumption among the general public and the key role of healthcare professionals in getting this message across. *"They are well placed to positively influence beneficial behaviours and promote healthier choices,"* highlights **Elio Riboli**, Permanent Chair of EGEA.

## A WELL-INFORMED PUBLIC

Several communication channels were used to provide the public with information.

Leaflets and posters were created and displayed in health professionals' waiting rooms. Some had specific target audiences. *"Two leaflets were designed specifically for pregnant women and new mothers, offering practical advice on how to incorporate fruit and vegetables into their diet and the complementary feeding process from an early age,"* **Sophie Pedrosa**, Head of Media, Advertising and Promotion, Interfel. **Videos** were also made available to health professionals for their waiting rooms.

In addition to this, we regularly attended **sport and health events** and ran campaigns in the mainstream **media**, on the **radio** or on **social media**. *"These actions enabled us to reach over 2 million people in three years,"* adds **Sophie Pedrosa**.

## HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ARE SUPPORTED AND BACKED UP BY SCIENCE

Leveraging health professionals was a no-brainer: *"Their patients fully trust them and see them as reliable sources when it comes to talking about diet,"* according to **Delphine Taillez**, Deputy Director at Aprifel. But they needed support to help them fulfil this role: *"They don't always feel comfortable addressing the subject and say they don't have the tools or knowledge to do so."*

So they needed to be given the knowledge and practical tools to enable them to talk about a healthy diet as well as advice to help them facilitate dialogue with their patients in these areas.

### › Training, fact sheets, conferences and press inserts

*"As part of the European programme, a training module was held over three days at the international 'EGEA 2018 - Nutrition and Health: from Science to Practice' conference, accredited for continuing medical education by the European Accreditation Council (EACCME®) and by the University College of General Practice of the University of Lyon 1. Concise and tailored documentation was then drawn up and approved by experts,"* explains **Johanna Calvarin**, Head of Nutrition and Health, Aprifel.

**Following the conference**, 15 fact sheets based on scientific consensus were created with the support of WONCA Europe, ECOG and the University College of General Practice of the University of Lyon 1. *"Some of the fact sheets focused on the key role of health professionals in promoting a diet rich in fruit and vegetables as a key component of a healthy diet, on their role in chronic disease and obesity prevention and their importance in the key stages of life, including pregnancy, complementary feeding and adolescence with practical advice for readers. Others offered health professionals some keys to collaborating with dietitians and providing nutritional counselling to their patients,"* highlights **Nathalie Komati**, Scientific Project Manager, Aprifel.

*"These tools were widely disseminated in France through visits by medical representatives to doctors' practices, clinics and health centres, our attendance at medical conferences and inserts in specialist publications,"* explains **Johanna Calvarin**.

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### › Wide range of health professionals reached

*"After the first two years of implementing actions, Fruit & Veg 4 Health's message on the importance of fruit and vegetables reached 135,000 health professionals and, according to a study, over 1,500 passed documentation on to their patients," says **Alexandra Williams**, Consultant at Quadrant Conseil.*

Another study conducted in 2016 with 500 French health professionals (general practitioners, paediatricians, gynaecologists and midwives) and then conducted again in 2020 showed that *"diet was still a key topic for health professionals, who regularly give their patients recommendations on fruit and vegetables, continue to promote the '5 fruit and veg a day' message and readily refer them to a nutrition professional when needed,"* concludes **Judith Soffer**, Head of the Health Department at CSA Research. The expectation of documentation is still high among practitioners. 9 in 10 are interested in receiving fact sheets and a large majority (80%) consider the documentation dedicated to patients useful.

## NEXT STEP: IMPROVING THE FRENCH EXPERIENCE AND EXTENDING IT TO OTHER COUNTRIES

The members of WONCA, ECOG and the steering committee commend the work done over the past three years and agree that the documentation is of a high quality and very useful. Nevertheless, after three years, the feedback calls for the programme to be optimised going forward.

The round table<sup>2</sup> put forward changes for the actions targeting health professionals:

- › Incorporate more nutritional education into health professionals' training and provide training modules to harmonise programmes at a European level;
- › Extend initiatives to other health professionals than doctors, such as dieticians, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, etc. to reach other population segments;
- › Unite a community of health professionals around prevention through diet;
- › Adapt the fact sheets for use in other countries and translate them into more languages;
- › Make simple and fun documentation available for health professionals to pass on to patients;
- › Develop tools for paediatricians to give to children.

Actions targeting the general public also need to be optimised:

- › Leverage digital tools and social media to get messages across to the general public and children;
- › Hold events on fruit and vegetables (recipes, workshops, etc.) to promote practical approaches;
- › Campaign in public places so the messages reach a wider audience;
- › Opt for messages that are positive, fun and targeted to the country's dietary habits and the socioeconomic circumstances of different population groups;
- › Offer practical tools to develop the general public's cooking skills.

**Find the abstracts of all the speakers who participated to the Closing Meeting and the practical tools from the European programme "Fruit & Veg 4 Health" at**

**[www.egeaconference.com](http://www.egeaconference.com)**

<sup>2</sup> Round table participants: E. Riboli & M. Laville (co-chairs); WONCA Europe members: Anna Stavdal, Katarzyna Nessler, Raluca Zoitanu; ECOG Members: Daniel Weghuber, Marie-Laure Frelut, Andrea Vania; Member of the Scientific Board of Aprifel and EGEA: Jean-Michel Lecerf

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