

Study for assessment of traditional food intake in Lebanon

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All emerging countries are now subjected to a dietary transition accompanied by a development of degenerative pathologies related to human diet.

Our research is aimed at investigating the current Lebanese food typology under the following theme: have Lebanon been able to preserve its local traditional diet or have it been affected by the exposure to western diet?

A pre-survey administered in Lebanon in 2003, showed that the existence of the traditional dishes in the Lebanese diet remain important till date. However, the absence of reliable and precise tools to conduct surveys aiming to describe food consumptions gave us an incentive to develop such tools. The main purpose of the exercise is to determine the contribution of the traditional Lebanese food to the relative overall intake and to evaluate its contribution in covering the various nutritional needs.

For this reason, we developed and validated a photographic atlas of food portions, a food frequency questionnaire and a table of food composition corresponding to the traditional Lebanese dishes. Using these tools, the daily intake of traditional dishes was quantified in a representative population sample of 566 Lebanese adults, aged 20–85 years, selected in 5 areas of Lebanon.

This cross-sectional study suggested that the modern Lebanese population preserved an important place for the traditional food: 57 % of the Lebanese population consumes more than 9 traditional dishes per week, which means 2 dishes per day.

This diet is characterized, as in most of the Mediterranean regions, by a dominating contribution of fruits and vegetables (42 %), cereals (34 %: bread 14 %; pastries 5 %) and legumes (7 %) in the daily food ration.

The Lebanese population, through the consumption of the only traditional dishes of which the energy intake exceeds the 75 %, has mean energy intake of 2047 kcal/day. The breakdown shows a statistical mean of carbohydrates ranging up to 46 %; 11% of proteins; 43% of lipids; 10 % of SFA, 20 % of MUFA and 10 % of PUFA. The Lebanese population covers almost all their needs in vitamins and minerals.

The Lebanese daily food ration presents a strong trend today to evolve towards diets rich in lipids on the detriment of carbohydrates. Carbohydrates keep however a place that is relatively important in the ration but with a changed pattern: consumed in the form of wholegrain cereal in the past, they are now replaced by refined and transformed cereal.

The results demonstrate that the validated food photography booklet is a useful tool to achieve acceptable quantification of consumption levels of traditional Mediterranean dishes. A validation of the nutritional composition will make it possible to derive the nutrient intake from the traditional diet.

In conclusion, Lebanon seems to be the place of coexistence between the tradition and the modernity. A valorization of the still very present traditional diet in the food habits should allow to slow down the nutritional transition and to improve the health of the population.