WIA
WORLD IODINE ASSOCIATION

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Nutrient profiles, health claims and the prevention of iodine deficiency disorders

Disorders related to iodine deficiency (aka IDD) can affect the good functioning of the thyroid, as well as brain development, particularly in foetuses and new-borns. A simple solution to address IDD lies in food fortification: Iodine is added to certain ingredients or foods (e.g. salt, milk) to ensure optimum intake for individuals and prevent iodine deficiency.

Two policy measures are essential to achieve this:

1) Public health policies need to acknowledge the health impact of iodine and contribute to educating consumers about the latter,
2) Food labelling requirements need to allow rightful health claims on foods to inform consumers about the presence of iodine in targeted products.

Nutrient profiles are a labelling system whereby food products are ranked or scored based on how 'healthy' they are considered. For instance, products low in sugar or fat will be considered healthy, and vice versa. The European Union has been envisaging the possibility to forbid health claims on products with an unhealthy nutrient profile.

The World Iodine Association (WIA) welcomes the European Union's intention to establish nutrient profiles to guide healthier dietary choices in consumers. Those profiles, however, should not come at the cost of public health policies to fight IDD and its rise in Europe.

1. The role of iodine in nutrition and health

Iodine is an essential micronutrient for good health and nutrition. Yet, our body does not produce it. Iodine deficiency can have various health implications and cause disorders affecting the functioning of the thyroid (e.g. goitre, hyperthyroidism) in adults and brain development in children. Based on the outcome of the EUthyroid project (funded under Horizon 2020), scientists reckon that **up to 50% of new-borns in Europe would not reach their full cognitive potential due to insufficient iodine intake**.

The main source of iodine is food; IDD can be easily prevented through fortification, i.e. by improving the nutritional value of ingredients and foods in a diet. Iodine is commonly added to salt, so as to reach the widest range of the population, or to other products such as milk and eggs in some countries.

2. Health claims and iodine

Health claims refer to the relationship between the presence of a substance in a food and a reduced risk of a disease or health condition. Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 on nutrition and health claims sets the regulatory framework for the EU to tell apart truthful from misleading claims.

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has recognised six rightful health claims in relation to iodine:

- Iodine contributes to normal cognitive function (art. 13(1)),
- Iodine contributes to normal energy-yielding metabolism (art. 13(1)),
- Iodine contributes to normal functioning of the nervous system (art. 13(1)),
- Iodine contributes to the maintenance of normal skin (art. 13(1)),
- Iodine contributes to the normal production of thyroid hormones and normal thyroid function (art. 13(1)),
- Iodine contributes to the normal growth of children (art. 14(1)(b)).

As a result, food products fortified with iodine[1] may place one of the above claims on their label, so as to draw consumer's attention to the presence of iodine and its role in health. Health claims are thus instrumental in educating consumers about micronutrients and their relation to nutrition and health.

3. Nutrient profiles and food labelling

Notwithstanding the Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation, Regulation (EU) 1069/2011 on food information to consumers imposes on the European Commission to set nutrient profiles to further specify when claims should be prohibited. Nutrient profiles refer to the healthy profile of a food based on its content in the 7 following nutrients and ingredients: energy, fat, saturates, carbohydrate, protein, sugars and salt (art. 30(1)).

Nutrition Information

	Per 100 g	%Reference Intake RI
Energy	485 kJ / 117 kcal	6% RI
Fat	8 g	11% RI
Of which Saturates	3,7 g	19% RI
Carbohydrate	9 g	3% RI
Of which Sugars	8 g	9% RI
Protein	1,4 g	3% RI
Salt	0,02 g	0% RI
Vitamin C	14,81 mg	19% RI

Salt content is exclusively due to the presence of naturally occurring sodium.
Reference intake of an average adult (8 400 kJ / 2 000 kcal)

[1] Provided they contain minimum amount of iodine, as per Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006.

WIA supports the European Commission's endeavour to avoid misleading claims and to assist consumers in making healthier food choices. We, however, want to warn of serious public health concerns that may arise from a too strict approach to nutrient profiling.

4. Impact of nutrient profiles on iodine fortification and public health

Preliminary work within the European Commission on a proposal for a nutrient profile regulation showed particularly restrictive and considered, envisaging a ban on any food product considered 'high in' one of the above-listed nutrients or ingredients.

Such an approach would mean that some of the main food products that serve as a vehicle for iodine, namely salt, would be barred from making health claims and thus from raising awareness about its iodine content. Indeed, iodised salt being naturally high in salt , it would not be allowed to bear any claim on the health impact of iodine because the product will be judged 'unhealthy' and score low on a nutrient profiling scale. That would counteract with public health policies and education campaigns to fight IDD and prevent its rise in Europe.

Call for an exemption from nutrient profiles for iodised salt

Given that salt is a key vehicle for iodine and instrumental in securing optimum nutrition and iodine intake in the European population, WIA calls for iodised salt to be exempted from nutrient profiles. Increasing cases of low to mild iodine deficiency in Europe require further educating consumers. Health claims on iodine-containing foods are essential to achieve that.