

# ACCESS TO AND CONSUMPTION OF HEALTHY DIETS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak is having a dramatic impact on the lives of families in Asia and the Pacific. Many people have lost their jobs or livelihoods, children are no longer accessing school meals, and some families are struggling to buy their usual range of foods. People are having to spend more time at home and there could be a shift towards non-diversified diets, with increasing consumption of pre-packaged processed foods and decreasing consumption of nutritious foods, including whole fresh fruits and vegetables. The current circumstances may aggravate the already difficult situation that many families face in accessing affordable quality diets. Food systems and supply chains are being disrupted by lockdowns and restrictions.

A well-balanced, diversified nutritious diet, which includes whole grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, and animal source foods, is one important way of promoting health and nutritional well-being and contributing to maintaining a strong immune system. To achieve this, food systems require support and supply chains must continue to supply adequate foods, minimize food waste, and ensure everyone, particularly vulnerable populations, can access food that is sufficient in quantity and quality, while also safe and affordable. It is also important to communicate clear messages about the importance of a healthy diet and the need to limit foods that contribute to overweight and obesity and increase the risk of non-communicable diseases, dental problems and long-term ill health. Recommendations include:

- 1. Support vulnerable people to access nutritious foods** in both urban and rural areas. This applies to households who cannot afford to buy nutritious foods because of the loss of jobs and/or livelihoods. Support can be provided through social protection and community programmes.
- 2. Support the movement of food supply chains** and reduce loss and waste through provision of productivity enhancing safety nets and reducing post-harvest crop and storage losses to improve food stocks. Remove artificial constraints to domestic trade to enable linking of small holders to markets.
- 3. Provide accurate information on how to maintain a healthy diet** for all, and especially children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, older persons and the sick. Such information should be widely promoted and communicated, with a focus on multi-media channels.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Consuming a healthy diet based on WHO recommendations<sup>4,5</sup> and

1 UNICEF messages on healthy eating during the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.unicef.org/eap/how-eat-well-while-staying-home>

2 FAO. Maintaining a healthy diet during the COVID-19 pandemic <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca8380en>

3 WFP. Food for thought: 7 tips on keeping a healthy diet in the face of coronavirus: The 'Grows, Gos and Nos' — advice from World Food Programme nutritionists on dos and don'ts of eating in quarantine. 23 March 2020. <https://insight.wfp.org/food-for-thought-7-tips-on-keeping-a-healthy-diet-in-the-face-of-coronavirus-7fab7f06177>

4 WHO. Food and nutrition tips during self quarantine [www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-technical-guidance/food-and-nutrition-tips-during-self-quarantine](http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-technical-guidance/food-and-nutrition-tips-during-self-quarantine)

5 WHO. Healthy diet. <https://www.who.int/behealthy/healthy-diet>

national dietary guidelines<sup>6</sup> is an important way to maintain and boost immunity and long-term health. A healthy diet means consuming well-balanced, diversified, nutritious foods, including whole grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, and animal source foods. There is no evidence that particular foods or food supplements can protect against COVID-19 but particular micronutrients can contribute to a well-functioning immune system (see the section on Micronutrient supplementation below).

4. **Avoiding foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS foods)** contributes to maintaining a healthy diet, preventing overweight and risk of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).
5. **There is no evidence to date that the coronavirus causing COVID-19 can be transmitted through food or food packaging.** It is safe to consume staples, fruits, vegetables, dairy products, pulses, meat, fish, and eggs while practicing usual food safety measures and implementing food hygiene principles.
6. **Promote personal food hygiene standards** including handwashing with soap before the preparation and handling of food.
7. **Promote and communicate the key lifestyle factors that are critical for maintaining well-being** and a healthy immune system. These include avoiding tobacco and excess alcohol, exercising as regularly as possible, reducing sedentary behaviours and getting adequate sleep.<sup>7</sup>

Source:

Joint statement on nutrition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific. April 17, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/5211/file>

*This brief has highlighted only one of the five key action strategies recommended in the joint statement. The others can be found in the original source presented above.*

*This brief was prepared by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction with support from SUN Civil Society Network.*

---

6 FAO. Dietary guidelines [www.fao.org/nutrition/education/food-dietary-guidelines/en/](http://www.fao.org/nutrition/education/food-dietary-guidelines/en/)

7 WHO. Take steps for better health <https://www.who.int/behealthy>