

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The “Nutritional Prevention” within Italy’s National Prevention Plan 2020-25 *La “Prevenzione Nutrizionale” nel Piano Nazionale della Prevenzione 2020-2025*

Key words: *Nutritional Prevention, Italy’s National Prevention Plan 2020-25, Chronic diseases, Food and nutrition security, Nutritional security*

Abstract

Italy’s National Prevention Plan 2020-25 is the first to address nutritional prevention, highlighting its importance in combating chronic diseases. This letter discusses the relationship between food safety, nutritional security, and the need for nutritional prevention in the plan. Chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes, are significant public health concerns in Italy, with poor nutrition being a critical risk factor. Incorporating nutritional prevention can promote healthy eating habits, food security and sustainability, reduce healthcare costs, and promote social cohesion and equality. Successful implementation will require cooperation among the government, the private sector, and the civil society to ensure healthier food choices and prevent chronic diseases in Italy.

Sir:

The current evidence highlights the crucial role of nutrition as a determinant of health, and its importance in preventing chronic diseases cannot be underestimated (1). In the past, the Italian Preventive Plans have largely neglected nutrition. However, Italy’s National Prevention Plan 2020-25 represents a significant shift from this trend, as it is the first plan to emphasize nutritional prevention (2). In this letter, we explore the importance of incorporating nutritional prevention into the Italian National Prevention Plan and the potential benefits it can bring to the health and well-being of the Italian population.

Before delving deeper, it is essential to clarify the relationship between food safety and food security, as the latter must encompass nutritional prevention. Food safety is a critical issue for Europeans and a top priority for the European Union (EU) (3). The EU has implemented numerous policies and regulations to ensure the safety of food consumed by its citizens. These policies and regulations come at a cost, and it is vital to comprehend how much money the EU spends on food safety.

According to a European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Report, the EU spent around €1.1 billion on food safety in 2020 (4). This figure includes the costs of monitoring, assessing, and managing risks related to food safety and implementing regulations. The report reveals that most of this spending (about 67%) was directed toward food and feed safety activity, which includes monitoring for chemical and microbiological contaminants and assessing risks associated with new and emerging hazards. The remaining 33% of the budget was allocated to animal health and welfare, plant health, and food chain management activities.

Determining the precise amount EU spends on food security is challenging. Numerous organizations and initiatives are working towards this goal, and funding can come from various sources. However, the EU has a significant food security and agriculture budget. The current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) budget for 2020-2027 is €387 billion. Most of this funding is directed towards measures promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development and support for farmers and food production (5). In addition to the EU budget, individual countries and private organizations contribute to food security initiatives within their borders and other parts of the world. Overall, the amount of funding directed toward food security will likely vary depending on the year and the specific initiatives the EU will undertake.

Nutritional security and food safety are both essential for ensuring access to safe and healthy food, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nutritional security refers to having access to a sufficient quantity and quality of food that meets the dietary needs of individuals and communities, while food safety refers to the measures taken to ensure that food is free from harmful chemical contaminants or pathogens that can cause illness (6).

Nutritional security is vital because it ensures that individuals and communities can access the nutrients they need to maintain good health and well-being. Nutritional security is fundamental in areas where food is scarce, or certain nutrients are lacking. Nutritional security is also essential for ensuring that vulnerable populations, such as children and pregnant women, have access to the nutrients they need to develop and thrive.

Food safety measures, such as proper food handling, storage, and preparation, are necessary to prevent the spread of foodborne diseases and to protect public health. Food safety is essential in areas where we expect foodborne diseases or where the risk of contamination is high.

In conclusion, nutritional security and food safety are essential to access sufficient, healthy and safe food. While the two are different concepts, they are not necessarily in conflict. It is vital to prioritize nutritional security and food safety to ensure that individuals and communities can access the nutrients they need to maintain good health while protecting them from harmful contaminants or pathogens (7).

Having clarified the relationship between food safety and nutritional security, we wish to emphasize the imperative need for the government to incorporate nutritional prevention in Italy's National Prevention Plan for 2020-2025. There are several reasons for this, which we outline below.

Firstly, it is important to recognize that chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes, are significant public health issues in Italy. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that non-communicable diseases account for 87% of all deaths in the country. Poor nutrition is a crucial risk factor for these diseases, with WHO estimating that modifiable risk factors, including unhealthy diets, are responsible for over 70% of deaths from non-communicable diseases in Italy (8). This reality underscores the necessity of addressing nutrition as an essential component of any national prevention plan.

Incorporating nutritional prevention into the Italian national prevention plan offers multiple benefits. Firstly, it establishes a framework for encouraging healthy eating habits among the Italian population. This is critical, given the growing prevalence of unhealthy dietary habits, such as consuming excessive amounts of sugar, salt, and saturated fats. The national prevention plan can provide guidelines and recommendations for healthier food choices and educate people on the importance of a balanced diet, aiding in the prevention of chronic diseases and enhancing overall health and well-being.

Secondly, including nutritional prevention in the national prevention plan can promote food security and sustainability (9). The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the significance of food security and the necessity for resilient food systems capable of withstanding shocks, such as pandemics and climate change (10). By focusing on nutrition, we can help encourage sustainable food systems that guarantee access to sufficient, healthy, and nutritious food for all, particularly vulnerable populations. In this way, we can contribute to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 2, which aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (11).

Thirdly, incorporating nutritional prevention in the national prevention plan can yield economic benefits. Chronic diseases are both a public health concern and a substantial economic burden. The Italian Ministry of Health estimates the direct and indirect costs of chronic diseases in Italy to be around 52 billion euros annually (12). Encouraging healthy eating habits can decrease the incidence of chronic diseases, resulting in cost savings for the healthcare system and society as a whole.

Lastly, including nutritional prevention in the national prevention plan can foster social cohesion and equality. Access to healthy and nutritious food is a fundamental human right, and it is crucial to ensure that everyone has equal access to it. However, this is not always the case, and vulnerable populations such as low-income households and marginalized communities may not have access to healthy food. The national prevention plan can address these disparities and promote social cohesion by ensuring that everyone has access to healthy food and fostering healthy eating habits across all socio-economic groups.

In conclusion, advocating for nutritional prevention in the Italian national prevention plan for 2020-2025 is a significant stride toward promoting healthier food choices and preventing chronic diseases. The plan holds the potential to advance food security and sustainability, reduce healthcare costs, and promote social cohesion and equality. It represents a positive development for public health in Italy and can serve as a model for other countries seeking to address the growing burden of non-communicable diseases. It is vital to ensure the plan’s effective implementation and to encourage collaboration among all stakeholders, including the government, private sector, and civil society, to promote healthier food choices and prevent chronic diseases in Italy.

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