## Contents

1. **Introduction** 1
   Reference 3

2. **Background** 4
   2.1 The global burden of chronic diseases 4
   2.2 The double burden of diseases in the developing world 8
   2.3 An integrated approach to diet-related and nutrition-related diseases 9
   References 10

3. **Global and regional food consumption patterns and trends** 13
   3.1 Introduction 13
   3.2 Developments in the availability of dietary energy 14
   3.3 Availability and changes in consumption of dietary fat 17
   3.4 Availability and changes in consumption of animal products 20
   3.5 Availability and consumption of fish 22
   3.6 Availability and consumption of fruits and vegetables 23
   3.7 Future trends in demand, food availability and consumption 25
   3.8 Conclusions 27
   References 29

4. **Diet, nutrition and chronic diseases in context** 30
   4.1 Introduction 30
   4.2 Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases through the life course 31
     4.2.1 Fetal development and the maternal environment 31
     4.2.2 Infancy 32
     4.2.3 Childhood and adolescence 34
     4.2.4 Adulthood 38
     4.2.5 Ageing and older people 39
   4.3 Interactions between early and later factors throughout the life course 40
     4.3.1 Clustering of risk factors 41
     4.3.2 Intergenerational effects 41
   4.4 Gene–nutrient interactions and genetic susceptibility 41
   4.5 Intervening throughout life 42
   References 46

5. **Population nutrient intake goals for preventing diet-related chronic diseases** 54
   5.1 Overall goals 54
     5.1.1 Background 54
     5.1.2 Strength of evidence 54
     5.1.3 A summary of population nutrient intake goals 55
   References 59
6.2 Policy principles for the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity 135
6.3 Prerequisites for effective strategies 136
  6.3.1 Leadership for effective action 136
  6.3.2 Effective communication 137
  6.3.3 Functioning alliances and partnerships 138
  6.3.4 Enabling environments 138
6.4 Strategic actions for promoting healthy diets and physical activity 142
  6.4.1 Surveillance of people’s diets, physical activity and related disease burden 142
  6.4.2 Enabling people to make informed choices and take effective action 142
  6.4.3 Making the best use of standards and legislation 142
  6.4.4 Ensuring that “healthy diet” components are available to all 143
  6.4.5 Achieving success through intersectoral initiatives 143
  6.4.6 Making the best use of health services and the professionals who provide them 143
6.5 Call to action 143
Reference 144

Acknowledgements 144

Annex
Summary of the strength of evidence for obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD), cancer, dental disease and osteoporosis 148
Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases
Geneva, 28 January–1 February 2002

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this report:

ACC United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination
AIDS acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
BMI body mass index
CARMEN Carbohydrate Ratio Management in European National diets
CHD coronary heart disease
CVD cardiovascular disease
DALY disability-adjusted life year
DASH dietary approaches to stop hypertension
DEXA dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry
DHA docosahexaenoic acid
dmf decayed, missing, filled primary (teeth)
DMF decayed, missing, filled permanent (teeth)
dmft decayed, missing, filled primary teeth
DMFT decayed, missing, filled permanent teeth
DONALD Dortmund Nutritional and Anthropometric Longitudinally Designed Study
ECC early childhood caries
EPA eicosapentaenoic acid
EPIC European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition
ERGOB European Research Group for Oral Biology
FAOSTAT Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations Statistical Databases
FER fat to energy ratio
GDP gross domestic product
GISSI Gruppo Italiano per lo Studio della Sopravvivenza nell’Infarto Miocardico
GNP gross national product
HBP high blood pressure
HDL high-density lipoprotein
HFI hereditary fructose intolerance
HIV human immunodeficiency virus
HOPE Heart Outcomes Prevention Evaluation
IARC International Agency for Research on Cancer
IDDM insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus
IGT impaired glucose tolerance
IHD ischaemic heart disease
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>IUGR</td>
<td>intrauterine growth retardation</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDL</td>
<td>low-density lipoprotein</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGRS</td>
<td>multicentre growth reference study (i.e. the WHO MGRS study)</td>
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<tr>
<td>mRNA</td>
<td>messenger ribonucleic acid</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSG</td>
<td>monosodium glutamate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUFA</td>
<td>monounsaturated fatty acid</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCD</td>
<td>noncommunicable disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>nongovernmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIDDM</td>
<td>non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSP</td>
<td>non-starch polysaccharides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUFA</td>
<td>polyunsaturated fatty acid</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>randomized controlled trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCN</td>
<td>ACC Subcommittee on Nutrition&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFA</td>
<td>saturated fatty acid</td>
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<tr>
<td>T1DM</td>
<td>type 1 diabetes</td>
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<tr>
<td>T2DM</td>
<td>type 2 diabetes</td>
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<tr>
<td>VLDL</td>
<td>very low-density lipoprotein</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCRF</td>
<td>World Cancer Research Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHR</td>
<td>waist:hip circumference ratio or waist:hip ratio</td>
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<sup>1</sup> In April 2002 the name of the Subcommittee on Nutrition was changed to the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition.
A Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases met in Geneva from 28 January to 1 February 2002. The meeting was opened by Dr D. Yach, Executive Director, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health, WHO, on behalf of the Directors-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization. The Consultation followed up the work of a WHO Study Group on Diet, Nutrition and Prevention of Noncommunicable Diseases, which had met in 1989 to make recommendations regarding the prevention of chronic diseases and the reduction of their impact (1). The Consultation recognized that the growing epidemic of chronic disease afflicting both developed and developing countries was related to dietary and lifestyle changes and undertook the task of reviewing the considerable scientific progress that has been made in different areas. For example, there is better epidemiological evidence for determining certain risk factors, and the results of a number of new controlled clinical trials are now available. The mechanisms of the chronic disease process are clearer, and interventions have been demonstrated to reduce risk.

During the past decade, rapid expansion in a number of relevant scientific fields and, in particular, in the amount of population-based epidemiological evidence has helped to clarify the role of diet in preventing and controlling morbidity and premature mortality resulting from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Some of the specific dietary components that increase the probability of occurrence of these diseases in individuals, and interventions to modify their impact, have also been identified.

Furthermore, rapid changes in diets and lifestyles that have occurred with industrialization, urbanization, economic development and market globalization, have accelerated over the past decade. This is having a significant impact on the health and nutritional status of populations, particularly in developing countries and in countries in transition. While standards of living have improved, food availability has expanded and become more diversified, and access to services has increased, there have also been significant negative consequences in terms of inappropriate dietary patterns, decreased physical activities and increased tobacco use, and a corresponding increase in diet-related chronic diseases, especially among poor people.

Food and food products have become commodities produced and traded in a market that has expanded from an essentially local base to an increasingly global one. Changes in the world food economy are
reflected in shifting dietary patterns, for example, increased consumption of energy-dense diets high in fat, particularly saturated fat, and low in unrefined carbohydrates. These patterns are combined with a decline in energy expenditure that is associated with a sedentary lifestyle — motorized transport, labour-saving devices in the home, the phasing out of physically demanding manual tasks in the workplace, and leisure time that is preponderantly devoted to physically undemanding pastimes.

Because of these changes in dietary and lifestyle patterns, chronic NCDs — including obesity, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease (CVD), hypertension and stroke, and some types of cancer — are becoming increasingly significant causes of disability and premature death in both developing and newly developed countries, placing additional burdens on already overtaxed national health budgets.

The Consultation provided an opportune moment for FAO and WHO to draw on the latest scientific evidence available and to update recommendations for action to governments, international agencies and concerned partners in the public and private sectors. The overall aim of these recommendations is to implement more effective and sustainable policies and strategies to deal with the increasing public health challenges related to diet and health.

The Consultation articulated a new platform, not just of dietary and nutrient targets, but of a concept of the human organism’s subtle and complex relationship to its environment in relation to chronic diseases. The discussions took into account ecological, societal and behavioural aspects beyond causative mechanisms. The experts looked at diet within the context of the macroeconomic implications of public health recommendations on agriculture, and the global supply and demand for foodstuffs, both fresh and processed. The role of diet in defining the expression of genetic susceptibility to NCDs, the need for responsible and creative partnerships with both traditional and non-traditional partners, and the importance of addressing the whole life course, were all recognized.

Nutrition is coming to the fore as a major modifiable determinant of chronic disease, with scientific evidence increasingly supporting the view that alterations in diet have strong effects, both positive and negative, on health throughout life. Most importantly, dietary adjustments may not only influence present health, but may determine whether or not an individual will develop such diseases as cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes much later in life. However, these concepts have not led to a change in policies or in practice. In many developing countries, food policies remain focused only on undernutrition and are not addressing the prevention of chronic disease.
Although the primary purpose of the Consultation was to examine and develop recommendations for diet and nutrition in the prevention of chronic diseases, the need for sufficient physical activity was also discussed and is therefore emphasized in the report. This emphasis is consistent with the trend to consider physical activity alongside the complex of diet, nutrition and health. Some relevant aspects include:

- Energy expenditure through physical activity is an important part of the energy balance equation that determines body weight. A decrease in energy expenditure through decreased physical activity is likely to be one of the major factors contributing to the global epidemic of overweight and obesity.

- Physical activity has great influence on body composition — on the amount of fat, muscle and bone tissue.

- To a large extent, physical activity and nutrients share the same metabolic pathways and can interact in various ways that influence the risk and pathogenesis of several chronic diseases.

- Cardiovascular fitness and physical activity have been shown to reduce significantly the effects of overweight and obesity on health.

- Physical activity and food intake are both specific and mutually interacting behaviours that are and can be influenced partly by the same measures and policies.

- Lack of physical activity is already a global health hazard and is a prevalent and rapidly increasing problem in both developed and developing countries, particularly among poor people in large cities.

In order to achieve the best results in preventing chronic diseases, the strategies and policies that are applied must fully recognize the essential role of diet, nutrition and physical activity.

This report calls for a shift in the conceptual framework for developing strategies for action, placing nutrition — together with the other principal risk factors for chronic disease, namely, tobacco use and alcohol consumption — at the forefront of public health policies and programmes.

Reference