Dietary patterns and behaviours among Arab newcomers in Western countries: A call for equitable and accessible food systems

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Sub-optimal nutrition is a leading risk factor for many non-communicable diseases, including diabetes and depression, and leads to a loss of about 255 million disability-adjusted life-years annually worldwide. The problem is much more common among immigrants due to socio-cultural and economic factors such as financial constraints and different food traditions. This is especially critical for Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees (ASIR), who retain their cultural identity via Arabic food and traditional dietary habits. A scoping review was undertaken to investigate the impact of migration/acculturation of ASIR in Western societies – North America (the US and Canada), Europe, Australia and New Zealand – on their eating patterns and to explore barriers and facilitators to healthy eating among this minority population. The aim of this study was to inform future nutrition research and program development process towards developing effective, culturally appropriate dietary interventions for ASIR.

Following immigration, ASIR introduced positive and negative changes into their diet, with enhanced fruit/vegetable intake, but also a substantial increase in consumption of nutrient-poor, energy-dense and processed/fast food. Personal barriers to nutritious eating included lack of nutrition awareness and poor host country language skills, whereas increased awareness of nutrition health was a strong facilitator. Family members’ preferences and the fear of mistakenly consuming non-religioulsly acceptable foods were major sociocultural barriers to healthy eating among ASIR across Western societies, whereas availability of accessible ethnic stores was a powerful facilitator. Unaffordable healthy foods and lack of genetically modified food labelling were key barriers to eating healthfully among ASIR in North America, but not Europe. We need a complete understanding of the interactions/differences in food habits/culture between ASIR’s particular countries of origin as well as the host countries. A thorough understanding of barriers and facilitators to eating nutritiously will enable us to design effective, culturally sensitive dietary programs for enhancing healthy eating among ASIR. This will also help inform necessary changes in food policy for ensuring equitable access to nutritious, culturally acceptable foods for ASIR and other minority groups in Western societies.