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Response to the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium

Short version

"We health professionals (doctors, surgeons, dentists, dietitians, doctors in science), wanted to react to the recent opinion of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium (RAMB) which proscribes the exclusive plant-based diet (vegan or vegan) in pregnant or lactating women, children and adolescents. We sent them a long answer that we wish to convey to the general public more succinctly.

Vegetarian (excluding animal flesh) and vegan (excluding dairy, eggs, honey) diets are increasing in Belgium and around the world for ethical, ecological and health reasons. Due to the recentness of these diets, they raise concerns among the general public and health professionals. However, they are much better known abroad, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries that have incorporated them into their nutritional recommendations.

The RAMB issued two opinions in June 2018 (published in the press in May 2019) and June 2019. It cites systematic deficiencies without providing any valid scientific argument to support this assertion. We have carefully analyzed the sources used for these two opinions and we find their position incomprehensible. None of the cited sources prohibit vegetarian diet.

For decades, many publications comparing plant-based nutrition to the omnivorous diet in adults have been reassuring and even encouraging. This type of diet is associated with positive effects on various clinical and biological parameters recognized as risk factors for cardiovascular diseases and cancers, the main contributors to global mortality worldwide. Vegans suffer less obesity, have better blood pressure, less "bad" cholesterol, less insulin resistance (diabetes).

In children and pregnant or breastfeeding women in particular, we cite many recommendations (American, English, Australian, Portuguese, Israeli, Italian, Canadian) that can be summarized with the words of the AND (Academy of

Nutrition and Dietetics), an American organization with 67,000 authoritative professionals in the field of nutrition. Its opinion is: "Well-managed plant-based (including vegan) diets are suitable for all stages of life, including pregnant women, breastfeeding women, infants, children, adolescents and athletes. The UK recommendations state that there is no minimum age for vegan diets. We remind you that from 0 to 6 months, breastfeeding should be favored and strongly encouraged. These recommendations insist on the correct information of health professionals to people and parents who wish to adopt this type of diet.

The most recent scientific publications state that no study on veganism has shown any risk to health or any neonatal malformations. They have even highlighted some benefits: less weight gain for the mother during pregnancy, reduced risk of preeclampsia and premature labor.

Our response to the RAMB is motivated by a concern for rigorous and up-to-date scientific information and the need to properly inform the general public without any financial interest. None of our co-signers (Belgian or foreign) has a financial link with the agri-food or pharmaceutical industry. We regret that the RAMB report does not mention the conflicts of interest of its experts. Of the 8 members of the Commission who drafted this opinion, 4 are related to the dairy industry (Danone and Nestlé).

In 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified processed meat as a carcinogen and red meat as a probable carcinogen. It therefore seems logical to be willing to exclude it from one's diet. More recently, Canada has removed dairy products from so-called essential foods. We also recall that we are facing an epidemic of childhood obesity with serious and proven consequences: morbidity and cardiovascular mortality and cancers. It is our duty as health professionals to take all necessary steps to promote healthy eating from an early age. Blaming plant-based diet for which, so far, we have no evidence of risk, but on the contrary many indices of benefits, is disinformation.

In the case of vegan diets, it is necessary to ensure sufficient daily and varied intake of fruits, vegetables, cereals, legumes and oleaginous (seeds, nuts, paste for children). In young children, care must be taken to gradually increase the amount of fiber in the diet. Special attention should be paid to vitamin B12 and vitamin D supplementation (also in the omnivorous diet) at all ages.

Nutrient deficiency is only to be feared if a food group is intentionally excluded from its diet. In this context, the balance is reached systematically and this mode of food proves to be more than adequate from a nutritional point of view. Some examples of sources for some nutrients: nuts, flaxseed and oils derived from it are good sources of omega-3. Calcium is abundant in green leafy vegetables, sesame seeds and mineral water. Cereals and legumes are rich in iron and protein. The methods of preparation (soaking, fermentation, germination) and cooking (steam) of plants allow better assimilation of different nutrients. Protein deficiency in our country is not a problem if we consume enough calories from various vegetable sources.

With these clarifications, we hope to restore a current and well-referenced scientific truth, reassure childcare professionals and parents, and also encourage nutrition training for the various trades in our health care system. "

PRESS CONTACTS

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