ANIMAL SOURCE FOODS AS A FOOD-BASED APPROACH TO IMPROVE DIET AND NUTRITION OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Animal source foods (ASF), particularly meat of a wide variety, fish, fowl, milk, eggs, snails, worms and other small animals supply not only high-quality and readily digested protein and energy, but also readily absorbable and bioavailable micronutrients. The inclusion of ASF in the diet promotes growth, cognitive function, physical activity and health, and it is particularly important for children and pregnant women. The importance of ASF consumption for health and nutritional outcomes has been documented in observational settings and, more recently, in intervention studies. A recent Kenyan study provides causal evidence that even a modest amount of meat to the diet of schoolchildren improves cognitive function and school performance, physical activity, growth (increased lean body mass), micronutrient status and morbidity. Outcomes from several nutrition interventions promoting ASF production and consumption also demonstrate improvements in nutritional outcomes. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a key role in promoting ASF in the diets of populations in low-income countries and in addressing issues that constrain household production and utilization of ASF. This paper also provides examples of the activities of several NGOs operating in Africa. In addition to current strategies, small freshwater fish and rabbits are two ASF sources with great potential for addressing nutritional deficiencies that have not received sufficient attention. Even modest amounts of meat and other ASF in the diet from a variety of sources can greatly improve the overall nutrition and micronutrient status, health and function of rural populations.

Key words: animal source foods; growth; development; Africa; meat