

LAOS | DIET QUALITY PROFILE

Key facts

- Diet quality in Laos is characterized by a high proportion of people consuming vegetables, fruit, and animal-source foods, and relatively high dietary risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Action is needed to improve consumption of whole grains, pulses, nuts, and seeds, and to moderate intakes of processed meats, sweet foods, soft drinks, and instant noodles.
- Three-fourths (73%) of women of reproductive age consume diets that meet minimum dietary diversity (MDD-W; at least 5 of 10 food groups), which means that over a quarter (27%) of women have a lower probability of micronutrient adequacy from their diet.
- About 27% of adults consume all five food groups typically recommended in food-based dietary guidelines, including vegetables; fruit; pulses, nuts or seeds; animal-source foods; and staple foods. The food groups most likely to be missing are pulses, nuts, or seeds (32%) and whole grains (16%). In contrast, the food groups most commonly consumed in addition to staple foods are animal-source foods (91%) and vegetables (91%).
- Related to dietary risk factors for NCDs, 42% of the population are consuming processed meats, 42% are consuming sweets, and 27% are consuming instant noodles. Soft drinks are another area of concern, which are more prevalent in urban areas (42% urban vs. 28% rural).
- There do not appear to be significant gender disparities in overall diet quality, although women have a higher GDR-Limit score than men, reflecting risk factors for NCDs.

Diet quality

A healthy diet helps promote health and prevent disease. It provides adequacy without excess of essential nutrients and avoids health-harming substances.⁶ Diet quality is related to malnutrition in all its forms, including undernutrition and nutrient deficiencies, as well as diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. Poor diets are estimated to be among the top of risk factors driving the global burden of disease.⁷ Understanding dietary patterns and trends in populations is the first step to inform actions to support and improve diet quality and track progress over time.

The Global Diet Quality Project has implemented a country-adapted Diet Quality Questionnaire (DQQ) in Laos, aiming to provide locally appropriate and standardized indicators of diet quality at the national level and for various population groups. Data were collected on consumption of 29 food groups from a nationally representative sample of women and men aged 15 and above as part of the Gallup World Poll in 2021.⁸ The DQQ food groups are used to construct indicators of nutrient adequacy and dietary risk factors for NCDs. These include the MDD-W score⁹ and the global dietary recommendations (GDR) score, among others.¹⁰ The GDR score measures the extent to which population diets adhere to global dietary recommendations for healthy diets. The overall score has two components: the GDR-Healthy score captures dietary factors that protect against NCDs, while the GDR-Limit score captures dietary risk factors for NCDs.

Overview of diet quality in Laos

In Laos, diet quality is adequate in some ways but not others. Most women (73%) in Laos meet MDD-W, while the majority of the population does not consume all recommended food groups (Fig. 1). The recommended food group most likely to be missing from diets is "pulses, nuts, or seeds." Less than one fifth of Laotians consume pulses (19%), nuts or seeds (20%), and whole grains (16%). These are protein-rich and micronutrient-rich foods, and missing these food groups may be a risk factor for nutrient inadequacy.



unicef 
for every child

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Income classification: lower middle

Child stunting²: **33%**

Adult obesity²: **6%**

Undernourishment (hunger)³: **5%**

Moderate or severe food insecurity³: **32%**

Percentage who cannot afford a healthy diet³: **80%**

DIET QUALITY SCORES

Food group diversity score (#/10; target is >5): **5.6**

Percentage of women consuming minimum dietary diversity: **73%**

Percentage of adults consuming all recommended food groups: **27%**

Global dietary recommendations score: **9.9** (of 18)

A HEALTHY DIET INCLUDES ^{4,5}

1. Adequate diversity
2. At least 400g of fruits and vegetables per day
3. Whole grains, pulses, nuts and seeds
4. At least 25g of fiber per day
5. Less than 10% (ideally less than 5%) of total energy from free sugars
6. Less than 10% of total energy from saturated fat, and less than 30% from total fat
7. Less than 5g of salt per day
8. Little if any processed meat, and red meat limited to no more than 350–500g per week.

On the positive side, the majority of Laotians (91%) consumes at least one vegetable—especially women—which helps to provide dietary adequacy and protect against NCDs, and many Laotians (74%) also consume fruit (Fig. 2). There is no evidence of large gender disparities in overall diet quality, but women have a higher GDR-Limit score than men, reflecting risk factors for NCDs (Fig. 3).

When it comes to dietary risk factors for NCDs, over a third (42%) of Laotians consume sweet foods, and 27% are consuming instant noodles (Fig. 3). Other foods to limit have particularly high rates of consumption in urban areas, especially processed meats, soft drinks, and deep fried foods (Fig. 3).

Summary and implications for the promotion of healthy diets in Laos

Actions to reinforce and protect current positive dietary patterns, and to curb and reverse those associated with increased risk of various forms of malnutrition, are needed. Previous evidence shows that while prevalence of hunger is low in Laos (5%), food insecurity is a concern for almost 32% of the population, and the majority of Laotians (80%) cannot afford healthy diets that meet dietary guidelines.³ This evidence reveals that although Laos has demonstrated political commitment to tackle malnutrition through a number of existing policies, strategies, action plans and initiatives—including the National Nutrition Strategy (2016-2025)¹¹—access to healthy diets remains a critical challenge in the country.

The data from Laos provide insights into positive dietary patterns as well as other dietary factors that may put the population at increased risk of various forms of malnutrition. Dietary improvements can come from increased consumption of whole grains, pulses, nuts, and seeds. Dietary diversity is low among the Laotian population, and the majority cannot afford a healthy diet—creating an urgent need to improve access and affordability of diverse nutrient-rich foods and reduce reliance on starchy staple grains. Action is also needed to reduce the consumption of food groups that pose dietary risks—including processed meats, sweet foods, soft drinks, deep fried foods, and instant noodles, especially in urban areas. These foods are known to displace nutrient-rich foods in the diet and are also associated with elevated NCD risk. The results of this diet quality survey can serve as a starting point to further refine needed actions and as a point of comparison to track progress over the coming years.

• dietquality.org.

References

1. World Bank (2021)
2. Global Nutrition Report (2021)
3. FAO et al. (2022)
4. WHO (2018)
5. World Cancer Research Fund 2018, based on WHO IARC (2018)
6. Neufeld et al. (2021)
7. Afshin et al. (2019)
8. Gallup Global Research
9. Martin-Prevel et al. (2017)
10. Herforth et al. (2020)
11. Lao PDR Ministry of Health et al. (2015)

Disclaimer - This publication has been produced with assistance of the European Union. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the partners for Global Diet Quality Project, Center of Nutrition, Lao PDR and UNICEF and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union



FIGURE 1. Dietary adequacy

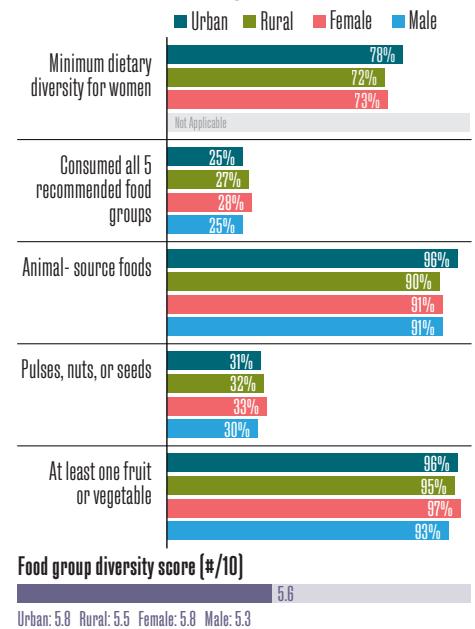


FIGURE 2. Dietary factors protective of NCDs

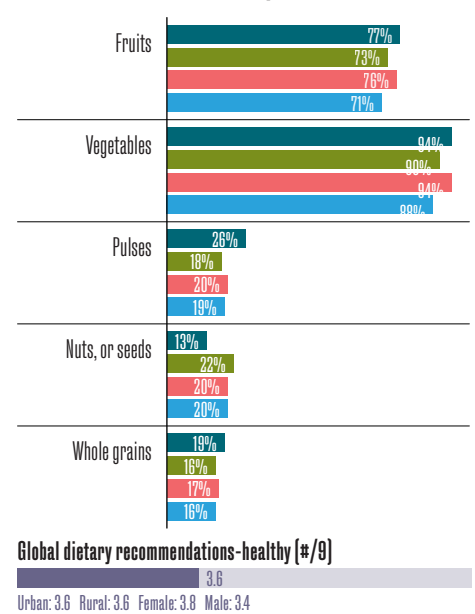


FIGURE 3. Dietary risk factors for NCDs

