**EXAMPLES OF CONCRETE ACTIONS**

- Early on, the Health Promotion Programme 1996-2002 was intended to improve citizens’ health, in part by expanding knowledge about risk factors such as poor nutrition. One of the initiatives launched was the Eurodiet project, which involved top scientists, policy advisors, and representatives from agencies and NGOs. The project was carried out over two years, with working parties focusing on health and nutrients with relation to people and policies. The study was successfully concluded in 2001, providing scientific evidence on healthy nutrition and lifestyle.

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- Under the Public Health Programme 2003-2008, funding continues to be allocated to the collection of data and the promotion of balanced diets. A project to fight childhood obesity coordinated by the European Heart Network, Children and Obesity and Associated Chronic Diseases, has been awarded €1.7 million. Its goal is to analyse food advertising targeted at children, work on policy options and complement actions and approaches at national level.

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**Further information**

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- EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health http://ec.europa.eu/commission/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/platform/platform_db_en.htm
- Examples of EU projects in the field of nutrition and obesity http://bookshop.eu.int/eubookshop/FileCache/PUBPDF/KINA21718ENC/KINA21718ENC_002.pdf
- The World Health Organisation http://www.who.int/topics/obesity/en/
- The International Obesity Task Force http://www.iotf.org
- Healthy Lifestyle in Europe in Adolescence http://www.helenastudy.com

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**Nutrition & obesity prevention**

September 2006

**Better health for all: promoting active lifestyles and improved nutrition**

Obesity among EU citizens, including children, is rising at an alarming rate. This phenomenon is linked with potentially fatal health problems, including cardiovascular diseases and certain cancers.

The EU has launched a series of initiatives designed to meet the problem head-on, helping consumers to make informed nutritional choices, encouraging an active lifestyle and improving the health of young people.

**CONTEXT AND NEED FOR EUROPEAN ACTION**

1. Who is “obese” and why?

- A common measure of an obese person is any individual with a Body Mass Index (BMI) above 30, whereas anyone with a BMI over 25 is classed as overweight.

\[
\text{Body Mass Index} = \frac{\text{weight in kilograms}}{\text{height in metres squared}}
\]

- Three principal factors leading to obesity have been identified as poor nutrition, lack of exercise and, to a certain extent, genetic reasons.

**Obesity Factors**

- Poor nutrition: across the EU, individuals are consuming around 500 calories per day more than they did 40 years ago.

- Lack of exercise: more than one in three EU citizens do no exercise in their leisure time and the average European spends over 5 hours a day sitting down.

- Genetic reasons: for example, an absence of the hormone leptin, secreted by fatty tissue to inform the brain of the amount of fat stored, can provoke severe obesity.
  (Source: Obesity, the disease of the millennium. The European Food Health. (Suarez, 1996) http://www.eufic.org/web/article.asp?cat=1&lng=en&sid=6&did=264&artid=169
Prevalence of overweight among schoolchildren in Europe

**THE EU’S ACTION**

- Improved nutrition and obesity prevention remain clear EU priorities into the future. The second Health Programme for 2007-2013, with its budget of €365.6 million, prioritises promoting health by focusing in particular on health determinants such as nutrition.

- To guide future action in the field of nutrition and obesity, scientific knowledge is needed. Under the Fifth and Sixth Framework Programmes for Research (1998-2006), the EU invested €51 million in research in the field of nutrition and obesity and projects, with scientists across Member States gathering data and sharing expertise in order to better understand the issues involved.

- The EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health was launched in March 2005, bringing together consumer organisations, health NGOs and EU-level industry representatives to tackle the EU's obesity problem. 100 new voluntary actions by 34 key European actors from industry and civil society have been triggered, including a voluntary ban by the Union of European Beverages Associations (Unesda) on adverts targeting children and a pledge by members of the European Modern Restaurant Association to provide information to customers on the nutritional content of their meals.

- New EU-wide rules on health and nutrition claims were voted by the European Parliament in May 2006 and will ensure that consumers can rely on food labels for easy-to-understand, accurate information on health and nutritional value, such as levels of salt, fat and fibre.

- A new Fortified Foods Regulation was approved by the European Parliament in May 2006, stipulating which vitamins, minerals and other substances can be added to food. This Regulation harmonises rules across Member States and defines strict labelling criteria, allowing consumers to make informed choices and avoid unnecessary consumption of certain nutrients.

- The EU is collaborating with international partners such as the United States, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Health Organisation. An EU-US conference in May 2006 laid the foundations for future transatlantic cooperation.

### Historical overview

- **Early 1990s**
  - First warning signs of the rise of obesity in the EU.

- **September 2002**

- **March 2005**
  - Launch of the EU’s Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

- **December 2005**
  - Publication of the Green Paper “Promoting healthy diets and physical activity”.

- **May 2006**
  - European Parliament votes in favour of new EU rules on health and nutrition claims and fortified food.
2. Why is obesity a cause for concern?

- There are over 1 billion overweight adults around the globe, including 300 million obese adults.
- In the EU, it is estimated that over 200 million adults may be overweight or obese – that is over half the adult population.
- One quarter of European schoolchildren are now overweight or obese, many more than previously predicted, as indicated in the graph below. This figure is growing by 400,000 each year and is causing great concern.
- 3 million schoolchildren in the EU are now classed as obese – a figure that is increasing annually by 85,000. Research shows that these young people are likely to develop chronic diseases before or during early adulthood.

- The link between excess weight and health problems is clear, as over a third of the EU citizens who suffer from a long-term disease are overweight.
- Obesity causes a range of very serious physical and mental health problems, ranging from diabetes to cancers, heart diseases, infertility, to psychological disorders.
- According to the WHO, poor nutrition, physical inactivity and obesity account for nearly 10% of disability-adjusted life years lost (one DALY represents the loss of one year of life in good health) – which is greater than the loss resulting from smoking.

- It is estimated that obesity accounts for up to 7% of healthcare costs in the EU, in addition to the wider costs to the economy caused by lower productivity, lost output and premature death.

3. Why is EU-wide action needed?

- Rising levels of obesity are a common feature across EU countries. It is therefore vital that Member States work together in the drive towards better nutrition and healthy living, pooling their knowledge and sharing best practice. Thanks to its capacity for bringing together international specialists, the EU is able to draw on a wide range of expertise and coordinate national efforts in the most effective way possible.

- With the publication of the Green Paper “Promoting healthy diets and physical activity” in December 2005, a broad consultation was launched and received important contributions from all areas of the EU, from industry to NGOs, civil society to the general public.

- Legislation on food labelling is being harmonised and will be enforced effectively across the whole of the EU. In this way, every citizen in each Member State will have equal protection and the same access to information.

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- Improved nutrition and obesity prevention remain clear EU priorities into the future. The second Health Programme for 2007-2013, with its budget of €365.6 million, prioritises promoting health by focusing in particular on health determinants such as nutrition.

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- Examples of EU projects in the field of nutrition and obesity: http://bookshop.eu.int/eubookshop/FileCache/PUBPDF/KINA21718EN/G/KINA21718EN_002.pdf
- The International Obesity Task Force: http://www.iotf.org
- Healthy Lifestyle in Europe in Adolescence: http://www.helenastudy.com

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Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection
European Commission – B-1049 Brussels
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/index_en.htm

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