

Contribution of the Spanish Food Safety Agency on the questions raised by the Commission in the Green Paper on “Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases”

IV.3. Health across EU policies

- What, if any, are the concrete contributions that Community policies should make towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity and towards creating environments that make healthy choices easy choices?

Community policies must focus on improving the health of EU citizens. We should therefore combine our efforts to boost healthy eating and promote physical activity, taking action in various areas: policies aimed at promoting the kind of urban development that provides pedestrianised areas in towns, more open spaces for exercise and sport, transport by bicycle, etc.; policies favouring the consumption of healthier food (fruit and vegetables, fish, cereals, pulses, etc.) over less healthy alternatives (e.g. those rich in saturated fats); education policies aimed at improving children’s knowledge about healthy eating, sport and physical exercise and the impact that these factors have on their health, etc.

What kind of Community or national measures could contribute towards improving the attractiveness, availability and affordability of fruits and vegetables?

Widespread access to fruit and vegetables must be made easier through policies that lower their market price; EU-wide communication campaigns should be developed promoting the consumption of fruit and vegetables and informing citizens of the health benefits of eating these foods on a daily basis; the provision of these foods in schools should be subsidised; research should be promoted into developing ready-to-use fruit and vegetables, which are easy and convenient to use in restaurants, etc.

In what areas related to nutrition, physical activity, the development of tools for the analysis of related disorders and consumer behaviour is more research needed?

Sociological studies are needed to find out what people know about healthy eating habits and physical activity and what they feel is stopping them from adopting these healthy habits.

IV.4. Public-Health Action Programme

- How can the availability and comparability of data on obesity be improved, in particular with a view to determining the precise geographical and socio-economic distribution of this condition?

In order to compare data on the prevalence of obesity in the different countries of the EU, each country must measure the same parameters for the same age groups.

In addition, in order to be able to analyse the effectiveness and efficiency of the actions carried out in each Member State, common indicators must be established for measuring the final and intermediate results achieved in the fight against obesity.

– How can the programme contribute to raising awareness of the potential which healthy dietary habits and physical activity have for reducing the risk of chronic diseases amongst decision-makers, health professionals, the media and the public at large?

A European observatory on the prevention of obesity must be created for the periodic evaluation of the development of obesity and associated diseases in the different Member States, using the data provided by the different national observatories.

Similarly, data on the social and economic costs of obesity and associated chronic diseases must be published periodically.

– What are the most appropriate dissemination channels for the existing evidence?

The mass media must play a fundamental role in raising the awareness of politicians and the public of the importance of diet and physical exercise for health.

V.1. Consumer information, advertising and marketing

- When providing nutritional information to the consumer, what are the major nutrients and categories of products to be considered and why?

– What kind of education is required in order to enable consumers to fully understand the information given on food labels and who should provide it?

The current model must be simplified if the nutritional information is to be understood and used by consumers. To do this, it may be enough to provide information on the product's calorific content, fat, saturated fat, protein, carbohydrates and salt. However, it does not seem as important to include information on vitamins and minerals, since a balanced diet easily provides all these micronutrient requirements.

Moreover, graphs should be used (bar charts, pie charts, etc.), which make it easier for consumers to understand the percentage of the recommended daily amounts they are consuming in each portion and to reduce their daily intake of certain products.

These measures must be implemented alongside effective mass-media communication campaigns.

– Are voluntary codes (“self-regulation”) an adequate tool for limiting the advertising and marketing of energy-dense and micronutrient-poor foods? What would be the alternatives to be considered if self-regulation failed?

All food advertising must be regulated, especially advertising aimed at children and young people, since they are the most vulnerable group as they are young and gullible. However, there is no justification for restricting advertising only for certain products deemed to be less healthy.

Advertisements in the media are transient; their regulation should therefore be based on flexible and adaptable mechanisms that can be tailored to the medium in which they appear.

A code of self-regulation has been in force in Spain since September 2005, which has produced good results during its first months of activity (PAOS code). Companies affected by the code took part in its development and their agreement has made it easier to adopt guidelines.

If self-regulation fails, there is always the alternative of legislative regulation.

– How can effectiveness in self-regulation be defined, implemented and monitored? What measures should be taken towards ensuring that the most vulnerable consumers are not exploited by advertising, marketing and promotion activities?

To ensure that these codes work properly, a structure must be created (or exploited, if one already exists) that knows how the advertising sector works and has procedures in place to act in a swift and flexible way. A monitoring committee should be set up alongside this structure, in which all stakeholders are represented, to supervise how the process progresses.

V.2. Consumer education

- How can consumers best be enabled to make informed choices and take effective action?**
- What contributions can public-private partnerships make towards consumer education?**
- In the field of nutrition and physical activity, what should be the key messages to give to consumers? How and by whom should they be delivered?**

The population must be educated at school, as it is at this stage in life that habits are formed, in terms of both eating and sport and exercise.

Parents must also be involved, since it is they, not schools, who are most responsible for the values that are instilled in children. Integrated actions must therefore be developed involving schools, parents' associations and town councils, as they represent the backbone of town life.

The messages to be communicated must always be positive and never repressive or stigmatising. Individuals must participate in and take responsibility for the development of these actions, so that they do not feel as if they are merely the target of these messages.

V.3. A focus on children and young people

- What are good examples for improving the nutritional value of school meals, and how can parents be informed of how to improve the nutritional value of home meals?**

Minimum requirements should be set, which school meals must meet.

It should be ensured that school meals are devised by staff with knowledge of nutrition and dietetics.

Parents should be informed of the content of school meals, so that the food that they prepare at home can complement the food eaten by their children at school.

– What is good practice for the provision of physical activity on a regular basis in schools?

Schools should provide a minimum of 4 to 5 hours of physical activity a week, with an emphasis on games and non-competitive activities.

All children should be encouraged to take part in active play, with specific strategies for children who are less able to participate in physical activities (including obese children).

– What is good practice for fostering healthy dietary choices at school, especially as regards the excessive intake of energy-dense snacks and sugar-sweetened soft drinks?

Replace the choice of food and drinks available in school tuck shops and vending machines, which have a high salt, sugar or fat content, with products that form part of a balanced diet (fruit, mineral water, low-sugar drinks, plain biscuits, etc.).

Remove the advertising on vending machines to eliminate the urge to consume certain products and replace the adverts with drawings or stickers that include messages promoting healthy eating.

– How can the media, health services, civil society and relevant sectors of industry support health education efforts made by schools? What role can public-private partnerships play in this regard?

Promote platforms that involve teachers' associations, parents' associations and local authorities, so that school- and community-based actions are taken to promote exercise and healthy eating.

V.4. Food availability, physical activity and health education in the workplace

– How can employers succeed in offering healthy choices in workplace canteens and in improving the nutritional value of canteen meals?

– What measures would encourage and facilitate the practice of physical activity during breaks and on the way to and from work?

Employers must make a commitment to promoting healthy lifestyles at work: providing a balanced range of meals in the workplace and products low in sugar, fat and salt in vending machines; providing a fitness centre with an instructor in or near the workplace for use during work hours (or at least at some time during the working day); introducing incentive programmes based on activities that require workers to expend energy and creating the role of a “healthy-lifestyle guru” within the company to monitor meals and develop exercise programmes.

V.5. Building obesity and overweight prevention and treatment into health services

– **What measures are needed, and at what level, to ensure that the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity is better integrated into health services?**

Check the weight and size of all health-service users with the Body Mass Index.

Develop information strategies for health professionals to communicate to parents, setting specific and achievable guidelines for healthy eating and physical activity.

Prepare and disseminate guides, leaflets, etc. for distribution in health centres.

V.6. Addressing the obesogenic environment

– **In what ways can public policies contribute to ensuring that physical activity is built into daily routines?**

– **What measures are needed to foster the development of environments that are conducive to physical activity?**

Design and implement policies intended to promote the kind of urban development that provides pedestrianised areas in towns, more open spaces (clean and supervised) for exercise and sport, transport by bicycle, etc.

Foster the creation of more public sports centres in residential areas; subsidise membership of private fitness centres for at-risk groups; promote the creation of local sports clubs; rambling clubs; sponsor sports and active hobbies, etc.

V.8. Fostering an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity

– **What are the most important elements of an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity?**

Promote the involvement of all public and private sectors, from town councils to the highest national and European authorities, through their departments of urban development, health, education, agriculture, economics, etc., in order to prepare an overall plan of aims and actions to prevent obesity and encourage daily exercise.

The participation of the business world (preparation, distribution and service), the hotel trade, the catering industry, as well as professionals and trade associations in the food and beverages and the vending-machine sectors is essential for this platform. The participation of scientific associations operating in the field of health and social sciences is also needed, as is the involvement of representatives from the sporting world, at individual level and as organisations, committees and clubs. Representatives from the world of fashion and beauty must also take part.

By involving all the individuals and organisations linked to food, physical activity and health in the development of strategies and actions, it will be easier to reach agreement with them to implement the plan in its entirety.

V.9. Recommendations for nutrient intakes and for the development of food-based dietary guidelines

At national level, general recommendations must be set as regards nutrition and physical activity that are tailored to cultural and social habits (food pyramid + physical activity).

Recommendations should be made as to what should be done, rather than stigmatising people or banning things. In this connection, the system recently introduced in the United Kingdom (nutritional profiles) does not consider foods in an overall context as part of a complete diet.

Education must be provided by schools from infancy on what makes a balanced diet and on the benefits of regular exercise, which will make it easier for people to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

Nutritional information provided to consumers should be improved: graphs should be used (bar charts, pie charts, etc.), which make it easier for consumers to understand the percentage of the recommended daily amounts they are consuming in each portion and to reduce their daily intake of certain products. All producers must use the same model.

The Spanish Food Safety Agency should establish European Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs), which the different companies should use for their nutrition labelling.

These measures must be accompanied by effective mass-media communication campaigns.