

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

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

Obesity Factors

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

(Source: FAOSTAT, *Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases: Report of a Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation, 2003*)
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/keydocs_nutrition_en.htm

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**.

(Source: Eurobarometer Health and Nutrition, 2006)
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_publication/eurobarometers_en.htm

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 Council, 1998)
<http://www.eufic.org/web/article.asp?cust=1&lng=en&sid=6&did=26&artid=163>

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.

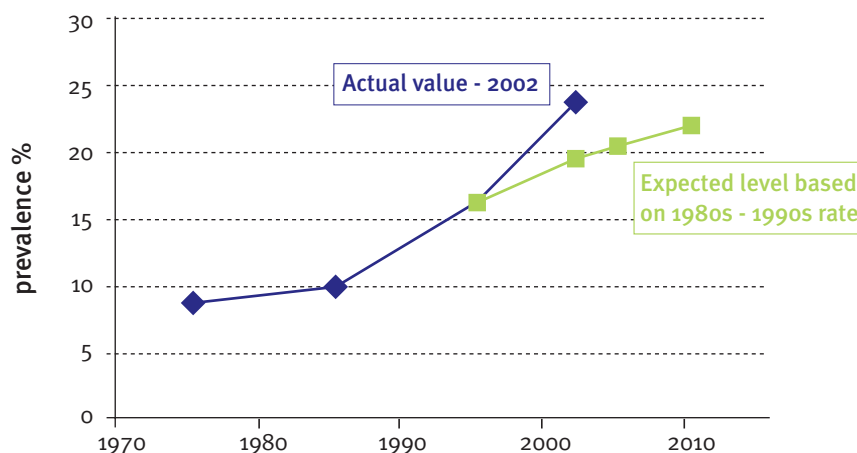
- It is estimated that obesity accounts for up to **7% of healthcare costs** in the EU, in addition to the wider costs to the economy caused by lower productivity, lost output and premature death.



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.

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 **€61 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**
Adoption by European Parliament and Council of the **Community Public Health Action Programme (2003-2008)**.
- **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**.

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.
- Receiving almost €5 million in EU funding under the **Sixth Framework Programme for Research 2002-2006**, **HELENA** (Healthy Lifestyle in Europe by Nutrition in Adolescence) is a project running from 2005 to 2008. One of **ten nutrition and obesity research projects** obtaining EU finance under the same framework, HELENA involves research groups from institutes across Europe. The study will provide facts about food and nutrients intake, food choices and obesity prevalence among European adolescents.
- 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.

Further information

- DG SANCO website on nutrition and physical activity:
http://ec.europa.eu/comm/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/nutrition_en.htm
- EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health
http://ec.europa.eu/comm/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/platform/platform_db_en.htm
- Health EU – Public Health Thematic Portal
http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/my_lifestyle/nutrition/index_en.htm
- Examples of EU projects in the field of nutrition and obesity
http://bookshop.eu.int/eubookshop/FileCache/PUBPDF/KINA21718ENC/KINA21718ENC_002.pdf
- Eurobarometer: Health and Nutrition, 2006
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_publication/eurobarometers_en.htm
- Green Paper: *Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases*
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/documents/nutrition_gp_en.pdf
- The World Health Organisation
<http://www.who.int/topics/obesity/en/>
- The International Obesity Task Force
<http://www.who.int/topics/obesity/en/>
- Healthy Lifestyle in Europe in Adolescence
<http://www.helenastudy.com>

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http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm

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