

# White Paper on nutrition, overweight and obesity related health issues

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**PURPOSE:** to propose a strategy for Europe on nutrition, overweight and obesity related health issues in the form of a **White Paper** of proposed actions.

**CONTENT:** the purpose of this White Paper is to set out an integrated EU approach to contribute to reducing ill health due to poor nutrition, overweight and obesity. The Paper builds on recent initiatives undertaken by the Commission, in particular the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health and the Green Paper "Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases" (see [COM\(2005\)0637](#)).

The last three decades have seen the levels of overweight and obesity in the EU population rise dramatically, particularly among children, where the estimated prevalence of overweight was 30% in 2006. This is indicative of a worsening trend of poor diets and low physical activity levels across the EU population which can be expected to increase future levels of a number of chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, stroke, certain cancers, musculo-skeletal disorders and even a range of mental health conditions. In the long term, this will result in a negative impact on life expectancy in the EU, and a reduced quality of life for many.

There have been repeated calls from the Council for the Commission to develop actions in the field of nutrition and physical activity. The Green Paper consultation found a very broad consensus for the view that the Community should contribute by working with a range of different stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. The Green Paper was also followed by a European Parliament resolution (see [INI/2006/2231](#)).

**Principles for action:** according to the White Paper, EU public action in this area must aim at complementing and optimizing actions undertaken at other decision levels, be they at the national or Community level. The Commission's role is also critical in pooling interesting local or national initiatives and setting up pan European mechanisms of exchange of best practices to give added value from a European dimension to the actions taken.

In addition, to be effective the measures must:

- address the root causes of the health related risks: actions set out in the strategy should contribute to reducing all risks associated with poor diet and limited physical activity including, but not limited to, that associated with excess weight;
- bring together all actors involved at all levels, using a range of instruments including legislation, networking and public-private approaches, and engage the private sector and civil society;
- require action from private actors, such as the food industry and civil society, and actors at local level, such as schools and community organisations;
- be closely monitored: the number of activities aimed at improving diet and physical activity is already extensive and is growing year by year. However, there is often little or no monitoring taking place, resulting in limited assessment of what is and what is not working well.

**A partnership approach:** the Commission considers that the development of effective partnerships must be the cornerstone of Europe's response to tackling nutrition, overweight and obesity and their related health problems, in particular within the framework of:

- the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health in order to provide a common forum for all interested actors at European level;
- local networks for action: using the EU Platform model, relevant fora could be developed, characterised by the participation of a large number of actors at the local level;
- the media, in order to develop common messages and targeted campaigns;
- a High Level Group focused on nutrition and physical activity related health issues, combining the relevant decision-making bodies of the Member States.

**Community level:** given the Community's limited competences in this area, the Commission intends, instead, to strengthen the legislative weaponry related to consumer information. The Commission also intends to give added value to each action taken at national level, where possible.

In this context, the White Paper proposes a series of measures that can be summarised as follows:

- improve nutrition labelling and health claims on food so that consumers are not misled by inaccurate statements or confused;
- improve advertising and marketing of foods by requesting that those involved in advertising develop voluntary codes of conduct on advertising material aimed (mainly) at children;
- support, in cooperation with the Member States and relevant stakeholders, education campaigns to raise awareness of the health problems related to poor nutrition, overweight and obesity, with particular attention to children;
- ensure the availability of healthy foods on the European market (by mobilising CAP funds and encouraging children to eat fruit and vegetables...);
- work on the reformulation of foods to reduce the consumption of these nutrients (e.g. reformulation of salt content);
- encourage physical activity in urban areas by funding, in particular, projects that promote walking and cycling;
- aim a number of actions towards priority groups (mainly disadvantaged groups) and towards certain priority settings (urban areas);
- increase the level of nutrition education by funding health and physical education activities at school (specifically, through the Comenius programme for school education);
- develop an evidence base to support policy making at the relevant level and ensure monitoring of the actions taken.

**Member State and private level:** the Commission has set out a comprehensive range of actions within its competence to be taken forward across all sectors. However, in several of these sectors, the primary focus should be on measures taken by the Member States. Private actors also have a major role to play in developing the healthy choice for consumers and in empowering them to make healthy lifestyle decisions. The food industry (from producers to retailers) could make demonstrable improvements in areas such as the reformulation of foods in terms of salt, fats, particularly saturated and trans fats, and sugars for consumers across the EU. As for the Commission, it is working to promote better rules for advertising and marketing in all Member States, by meeting, at least, European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) benchmarks, and by encouraging self regulation, where possible. The Commission intends on strengthening monitoring systems, which are needed for self regulation to be effective.

Finally, future actions are planned to encourage cooperation and coordination with the actions taken by the WHO (World Health Organisation).

**Monitoring:** a review of progress will be carried out in 2010 in order to observe the extent to which policies have been brought in line with the objectives of the White Paper. This review will also reveal progress made in terms of industry self regulation.