

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

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The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted the own initiative report drafted by Alessandro **FOGLIETTA** (UEN, IT) on the White Paper on nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues. It welcomes the White Paper on Nutrition as an important step in an overall strategy to stem the rise in obesity and overweight and address diet-related chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease including heart disease and stroke, cancer and diabetes, in Europe.

MEPs reiterate their call to Member States to recognise obesity as a chronic disease. They outline a number of recommendations to combat obesity through improved consumer information (notably by improved labelling) to the promotion of physical activity.

The report highlights the following issues:

- putting in place a policy geared to food quality;
- providing comprehensible information on labels enabling consumers to choose between good, better and less good nutrition;
- setting up of the High-Level Group on Nutrition and Physical Activity aiming to improving knowledge and the exchange of best practice in the fight against obesity;
- recognising the substantial role of self-regulation in fighting obesity, particularly when concerning children and calling for more tangible measures especially targeted at children and at-risk groups;
- promoting consumer information so as to allow them to choose the best sources of nutrients needed to achieve and maintain the optimal nutrition intake best suited to their individual lifestyle and health;
- improving the health literacy of citizens to empower them to make effective decisions about their own and their children's diets;
- informing and educating parents on nutritional issues should be carried out via the relevant professionals (teachers, cultural events organisers and health professionals) at the appropriate locations;
- linking a future school fruit programme to a broader educational strategy, for example by means of lessons on diet and health in primary schools;
- encouraging physical exercise as a daily routine by creating opportunities in the local environment that motivate people to engage in leisure time physical activity;
- encouraging girls in their later teenage years to participate actively in sporting activities;
- encouraging the private sector to play a role in reducing obesity by developing new and healthier products.

**Towards a common approach:** MEPs stress that the European Union should take a leading role in formulating a common approach and promoting coordination and best practice between Member States. They are convinced that an important European added value can be provided in fields such as consumer information, nutritional education, media advertising, agricultural production and food labelling in particular with indication of trans-fat content. They call for the development of European indicators such as waist size and any other risk factor relating to obesity (especially abdominal obesity).

**Priority to children:** MEPs invite the Commission and all actors to set as a priority the fight against obesity from the early stages of life. Proposed actions include: information campaigns to raise awareness among pregnant women about the importance of a balanced and healthy diet; urging Member States to

propose guidelines drawn up by experts on how to improve physical activity as early as the pre-school period and to promote nutritional education already at this early stage. MEPs consider that it is primarily at **school level** that steps have to be taken to ensure that physical activity and balanced eating become part of the behaviour of a child. They are also asked to monitor and improve the quality and nutritional standards of school and kindergarten meals. The report advocates making fresh fruit and vegetables more available at points of sale and invites competent authorities to ensure that at least **3 hours a week** of the school curriculum are devoted to physical activities. MEPs welcome a possible "**fruit at school**" project to be financially supported by the EU similar to the current school milk programme. The EU is urged to be more flexible over Member States' application of lower VAT rates for necessities of a social, economic, environmental or health-oriented nature; in this respect; calls on those Member States which have not yet done so to cut VAT on fruit and vegetables, recalling that Community law authorises them to do so; calls, in addition, for the Community texts in force to be amended to allow fruit and vegetables to benefit from a very low rate of VAT (under 5%).

**Informed choices and availability of healthy products:** MEPs believe that product reformulation is a powerful tool for reducing the intake of fat, sugar and salt in our diets and encourage food producers to further engage in reformulation of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods in order to reduce fat, sugar and salt and enrich their fibre, fruit and vegetable content. They stress that **nutrition labelling must be mandatory and clear** to help consumers make a healthy choice of food and recommend that to enable consumers to compare the nutrient content in different food products, nutrition labelling should be expressed in 100g/100ml. MEPs call for an EU-wide ban on artificial trans-fatty acids and urge EU Member States to follow good practice in controlling the content of substances (e.g. salt) in food. They also call for an analysis of the role played by flavour enhancers such as glutamates, guanylates and inosinates. The industry is called on to review single-serving portion sizes, providing a broader range of smaller portion options.

**Media and advertising:** additional incentives should be created to promote physical exercise. Although MEPs consider the voluntary approach adopted in the Directive on "Audiovisual Media Services without frontiers" on advertising food of poor nutritional value directed to children to be a step in the right direction, they ask the Commission to bring forward stricter proposals if the 2010 review of the Directive declares the voluntary approach to have failed in this field. The industry is called upon to restrict commercials for unhealthy foods targeted at children to protected times. Such restrictions should also cover new forms of media such as online games, pop-ups and text messaging.

**Health care and research:** MEPs ask for particular attention to be paid to research in health. They acknowledge that health professionals, especially paediatricians and pharmacists, should be made aware of their essential role in the early identification of patients at risk of overweight and cardiovascular disease. The Commission is called upon to develop European anthropometric indicators and guidelines on cardio metabolic risk factors associated with obesity. As regards malnutrition, the report highlights that 40% of patients in hospitals and between 40 and 80% of people in elderly care homes are malnourished. Therefore, Member States are asked to improve the quantity and quality of food in hospitals and elderly care homes. The Commission should also promote best medical practices, for example through the EU Health Forum, as well as information campaigns on obesity-related risks and abdominal obesity in particular drawing attention to the cardiovascular risks. The dangers of 'home diets' should also be emphasised. Lastly, MEPs call on the Commission and Member States to fund research into the links between obesity and chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes.