

Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases

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PURPOSE: a Green Paper on “promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases.”

CONTENT: the Council has invited the Commission to contribute towards promoting healthier life styles across the EU. It has also invited the Commission to study ways of promoting better nutrition within the European Union and, if necessary, present appropriate proposals.

Article 152 of the Treaty on European Union (a high level of human health) gives the Community the right of initiative to act on nutritional matters. A number of Community areas relate to nutrition and physical activity and the Council has confirmed the need to mainstream nutrition and physical activity into related policy areas.

The purpose of this Green Paper, therefore, is to launch an extensive public consultation on how to reduce obesity levels and the prevalence of associated chronic diseases in the EU. It is seeking contributions from a broad range of interested parties. The ultimate aim being to develop a European strategy on reducing obesity levels, which complement and support existing national measures. The Green Paper calls for concrete suggestions and invites ideas on action that can help address the serious problem of obesity as well as encouraging European citizens to engage in healthier lifestyles.

A number of recent studies indicate that obesity levels are increasing at an alarming rate. Up to 27% of men and 38% of women are obese in some parts of the EU. The number of overweight children is also growing rapidly, currently rising by 400 000 a year. Obesity contributes to a number of serious illnesses most notably heart disease, type-2 diabetes, hypertension, stroke and certain types of cancer. Poor nutrition and insufficient exercise are among the leading causes of avoidable death in Europe. It is estimated that as much as 7% of total healthcare costs in the EU can be linked to obesity related illnesses.

The Green Paper, therefore, focuses on the key question of: How to promote healthier lifestyles across the EU? It examines the role for self-regulation in the both the food and advertising industries. Respondents are asked to exchange ideas on how information, communication and education can be improved upon and what action could be taken to encourage better diets in various demographic groups. Also discussed are the roles of health services in promoting nutritional diets and encouraging regular physical activity. Other questions asked are:

- What measures can the Community or national governments do towards improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of fruits and vegetables.
- How can the Community contribute towards encouraging consumers to opt for low fat, sugar and salt diets?
- Is self-regulation and voluntary controls enough to limit marketing and advertising campaigns which promote energy-dense and nutritionally poor foods?
- If self-regulation fails what should the alternatives be?

- What key message should consumers be receiving? Who should deliver that message and how?
- How can school meals be improved upon?
- How can public policy initiatives ensure that physical activity is built into daily routines?
- What is the best way to inform consumers about “dietary guidelines”? Could nutrient profile scoring systems contribute to such developments?

The public consultation will last until 15 March 2006. A report summarising the contributions will be published on the Commission website by June 2006. Based on the answers received the Commission may consider further action.