

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

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Frédérique RIES (ALDE, BE) in response to the Commission's Green Paper on 'Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases'. MEPs welcomed the Commission's commitment to healthy eating (in quantitative and qualitative terms) and physical activity, and the fight against obesity and major diet-related diseases, and called for this to be regarded henceforth as a political priority of the European Union and its Member States.

The committee advised all the Member States to recognise obesity officially as a chronic disease in order to prevent obese people from being stigmatised and discriminated in any way, and to ensure that they have access to appropriate treatment under their national health systems. It also pointed out that school is the place where children spend most of their time and that the school environment must therefore encourage young children to develop their tastes and promote regular physical activity and a healthy lifestyle, particularly in order to counter the decreasing time allocated to physical education in schools in the EU. The report therefore urged the Commission to develop mechanisms to promote best practice in schools which take account of the most effective initiatives educating children about healthy eating and providing food based on high nutritional standards. And it called on the Member States to provide sufficient funds for school catering in order to allow schools to serve freshly produced meals, preferably from organic or regional agriculture, and to encourage healthy dietary habits from an early age.

The committee expressed its "strong interest" in the food signposting systems put in place in several Member States by food companies, retailers or public bodies in order to simplify nutrition messages, and recognised the value of such signposting systems as well as healthy-choice logos when they are favoured by consumers and easy to use. The report noted that research has confirmed that schemes which indicate levels of nutrients via an interpretative element are the most helpful to consumers in choosing healthier options. It called on the Commission to draw on this experience and research to develop and introduce an EU-wide "front-of-pack nutrition labelling scheme", and pointed out that a consistent message to consumers demands a certain degree of harmonisation in this area and that such messages must be scientifically based.

The committee was concerned about reports that the nutritional content of fruit and vegetables produced in Europe had fallen over the last decades and called on Commission and Council to take the necessary steps in the 2008 Common Agricultural Policy review in order to consider food nutritive value an important criterion and to enhance quality food production and healthy nutrition incentives in the framework of rural development policies.

Lastly, MEPs said that product reformulation is a powerful tool for reducing the intake of fat, sugar and salt in our diets, and welcomed the steps taken by a few manufacturers and retailers to move in this direction. The Commission, Member States, manufacturers, retailers and caterers were urged to step up efforts to ensure reduced fat, sugar and salt levels in foods. Manufacturers should use product reformulation not just to launch new, sometimes more expensive brands, but to prioritise cutting fat, sugar and salt in existing everyday brands.

