

Factsheet n°4 – Healthy Diets

Facts and Figures

- Unhealthy diet and lack of physical activity are leading global risks to health.
- Intake of fruit and especially vegetables is well below the WHO's recommendation of 400 g per day for children and young people in almost all Member States.¹
- A healthy diet helps to protect against non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer.²
- 51.6 % of the EU's population (18 and over) was overweight in 2014³
- 1 in 3 11-year-olds is overweight or obese.⁴

AIM Recommendations

- ***Make legal agreements with the food and drinks industry to produce more healthy food and drinks by diminishing levels of salt, unhealthy fat and sugar.***

The European Commission and Member States should create incentives which would lead food business operators to reformulate and produce more environmental-friendly and healthier products while discouraging the production of processed foods containing high levels of saturated fats, trans-fats, free sugars and salt/sodium.

WHO recommends limiting the daily intake of free sugars to less than 10% of total energy intake and salt to less than 5 g. Regarding fats, the recommended daily consumption of TFAs is less than 1% of the total energy intake; while the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) recommends it to be as low as possible. Yet, average intakes show that Europeans tend to exceed those recommendations, especially among some population sub-groups such as youth or low-income citizens.⁵ On the one hand, this calls for empowering consumers to make healthy choices. On the other, it reflects a clear need to improve the nutritional quality of the foods which are made available on the European market and which are widely consumed. Improving low quality products by reducing the levels of saturated fat, salt and sugar in processed foods through reformulation, would be beneficial to public health, contribute to tackle the growing problem of (childhood) obesity and contribute to the fight against health inequities.

¹ [EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020](#), p. 12

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Overweight_and_obesity_-_BMI_statistics

⁴ <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity/data-and-statistics>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet>

- ***Strengthen the role of primary care in preventing eating disorders and promoting healthy diets.***

Primary healthcare plays a crucial role in health promotion and disease prevention. It is the first contact point to healthcare systems and has a protagonist part to play when it comes to improving levels of health literacy. Healthcare and childcare professionals should be properly trained in order to achieve more effective primary prevention strategies. That training should include “risk factors for overweight and obesity, early detection of overweight and obesity in children and young people and ways to motivate and help families to make positive changes to their lifestyles”.⁶ It is also vital to strengthen the collaboration of primary care workers with other essential actors within local communities like NGOs or sports clubs. Furthermore, there should be clear guidelines and recommendations for healthy nutrition/meal plans including food quality and sustainability for all catering facilities (company canteens, refectories etc) as well as recommendations for healthy menus for restaurants.

- ***Make use of economic incentives or disincentives to promote healthy diets.***

AIM encourages the European Commission and Member States to increase the price of HFSS foods and to make healthier options more affordable. The European Commission Farm to Fork strategy should include this important aspect of European food markets, which has an enormous impact on public health.

Socio-economic factors are a key determinant in consumer behaviours. Consumers with lower income tend to consume products with high industrial trans fats content, often sold at a lower price than their healthier alternatives.⁷ Taxes on HFSS foods and beverages have the potential to achieve large reductions in purchases of those products and to promote healthier diets (see the case of Chile).⁸ Increasing the price of HFSS foods through taxation encourages populations to go for the healthier option. In combination with targeted prevention programmes, they have the potential to achieve behaviour change and contribute to the reduction of health inequities. AIM would welcome the introduction of higher taxation rates or excise duties on HFSS foods and drinks. At the same time, it is vital to ensure that healthy options are made more affordable by financially incentivising their purchase by schools, canteens, and private households. The EU platform for action on diet, physical activity and health could help identify the most effective incentives.

- ***Encourage an increased consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables through a settings approach.***

Healthy diets should be encouraged from an early stage at schools and kindergartens. Workplaces also offer opportunities for the promotion of healthier food consumption.

There are clear socio-economic inequalities in the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, with lower socio-economic groups at greater risk of developing unhealthy diets. Promoting the consumption of healthy foods at schools and kindergartens contributes to the fight against inequities and helps ensure that healthy habits are assimilated from an early stage. Most children have at least

⁶ [EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020](#), p. 12

⁷ See for example: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4910945/>

⁸ Caro, J.C & al, [Designing a tax to discourage unhealthy food and beverage purchases: The case of Chile](#), 2017

one meal at school either brought from home or made by the canteen. Schools therefore offer a clear opportunity to increase the uptake of healthy and high-quality foods amongst younger generations. Meals and other foods provided and offered in schools should meet those requirements. At the same time, access to unhealthy snacks should not be allowed and children (and their families) should benefit from a strong healthy lifestyle education, notably focussing on the importance of healthy and sustainable diets and on the reduction of food waste.⁹ Milk and water should be the only drinks available in schools.

Workplaces can also contribute to helping workers make healthier food choices. Providing healthier options in cafeterias and vending machines but also at company meetings and events, organising events or trainings to inform employers on nutrition, organising contests,... are only some of the actions which could be implemented and which would contribute to building healthier cultures.

- ***Provide clear and comprehensive information to consumers on labels.***

AIM invites both the European Commission and Member States to investigate the most efficient and intelligible way to provide nutritional and environmental information on labels for all foods and beverages (including alcohol) and to implement it across the EU.

Informing consumers in a comprehensive and understandable way is a sine qua non condition to truly empower them to make healthy choices. Labels can sometimes be difficult to interpret and to relate to ones' own needs. There is a clear added value in finding an additional form of presenting the nutritional information provided to the consumer on foods and drinks in a widely understandable way. Such a tool would facilitate consumer choice by simplifying the identification of the healthiest foods and beverages. Beyond nutritional information, the ecological footprint of foods and drinks should also be provided, as people should be aware of the impact of what they consume on their environment.

- ***Protect children and minors from exposure to the marketing of foods or drinks that are high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS).***

Member States should adopt measures that effectively minimise children's and minor's exposure to the marketing of HFSS foods and beverages. The European Commission should also propose a directive on the issue. The WHO nutrient profile should be applied to determine whether the products can be categorised as HFSS.

Marketing is a key factor in today's unprecedented levels of childhood obesity, the steep increase in the prevalence of type-2 diabetes, and the burden of preventable chronic diseases across the EU. There is growing evidence on the effects of advertising on children's eating and drinking behaviour, preferences, nutrition knowledge and consequently their food intake.¹⁰ In its recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-Alcoholic Beverages, the WHO calls for policies which reduce both the exposure (i.e. reach, frequency, impact) of children to, and the power (i.e. content, design, etc.) of marketing of HFSS foods.¹¹ AIM subscribes to that recommendation. Adopting effective watersheds

⁹ Idem, p. 12

¹⁰ [World Cancer Research Fund International, Building momentum: lessons on implementing robust restrictions of food and non-alcoholic beverage marketing to children](#), 2020, p. 2.

¹¹ WHO, [Set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children](#), p. 8

and prohibiting the use of promotional strategies, incentives, or designs which particularly appeal to children are some of the measures which should be included in governments' strategies. Restrictions should also cover all forms of marketing, both off- and online: point of sale, advertising, sponsorship, product placement and branding, product design and packaging, and direct marketing.

New and more targeted marketing techniques on digital media further put young people at risk of exposure. Indeed, as underlined by WHO, "(...) digital marketing may be more powerful and less controllable than traditional marketing."¹² Self-regulation and voluntary commitments to date have failed to solve important health challenges. There is therefore a clear need for legally binding regulation for online marketing to children and young adults.

The European Commission has a clear role to play when it comes to marketing regulation as many forms of it cross borders (including broadcasted or online marketing). AIM would welcome the proposal of a directive which would reflect the above-mentioned restrictions and concerns.

- ***Encourage the production and consumption of sustainable foods.***

The European Commission, through its Farm to Fork Strategy, should encourage both the production and consumption of more sustainable products. Other initiatives like the directive on "Empowering consumers for the green transition" are also key in achieving the much-needed shift towards a healthier and more environmental-friendly food consumption. Of course, Member States also have a responsibility to achieve that shift. They should act for example by ensuring that consumers are informed on sustainable diets, internalising the external costs (health and environment) within food prices, and by disincentivising environmentally harmful production while incentivising sustainable practices.¹³

Food systems, from production to consumption and waste, have a clear impact on the environment, on climate, and on health. Current consumption and production patterns are far from healthy and sustainable. The European Commission recognises, in its proposal for the Farm to Fork Strategy, the need for a shift in the way we produce, buy and consume food in order to improve the environmental footprint and help mitigate climate change.¹⁴ Europeans should be nudged to make healthier choices with a lesser impact on the environment: consuming more fruits and vegetables, less processed food and meat, for example. The Farm to Fork Strategy should contribute to ensure that production meets those wished consumption habits; that healthier foods are accessible and promoted over unhealthy options; and that citizens are empowered to make the right choices both for their health and planet.

Best Practices

Austria – SVS

„SVS-Is(s)t-gesund“ is a cooperation between the SVS and the Association of Dietologists in Austria, which has developed a nutritional medical advisory service (weight loss programme) especially for the self-employed.

¹² Miller, Peter, [Investigating the introduction of the alcohol minimum unit price in the Northern Territory](#), 2020, p. 32.

¹³ Institute for European Environmental Policies, [EU Policy options to encourage more sustainable food choices](#), p. 59-60.

¹⁴ [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system](#), p. 3

SVS-Health weeks and camps with a focus on nutrition and weight include lots of information and tips which are customized to the everyday life and living conditions of the self-employed. Considering a holistic view of health the topic of healthy diet is also part of many other prevention and health promotion offers of the SVS.

“Richtig Essen von Anfang an“ – “Healthy eating from the start“ is a programme launched by the Main Association of Austrian Social Insurance Institutions (including the SVS), the Austrian Agency for Health and Food Security GmbH (AGES) and Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection that offers nutritional advice for pregnant women, nursing mothers and toddlers and 4- to 10-year-old children. Free nutrition workshops are offered in all Austrian federal states. The aim is that mother and child are optimally cared for by a good choice of food and drink right from the start. Partners and other caregivers such as grandparents can also take part.”

Belgium - Liberal Mutuals

In Belgium, some of the Liberal Mutuals, organise sessions on healthy nutrition and provide financial interventions, a.o. in line with the Flemish governmental action '[Oog voor lekkers](#)', a project to promote fruit, vegetables and milk at school. They also support and distribute the Flemish government's actions on healthy nutrition. Liberal mutuals also support and distribute the Flemish government's actions on healthy nutrition.

Germany – VDEK

The [offer](#) "Recognised exercise kindergarten with the plus point nutrition" is part of the state initiative "Prevention of overweight and obesity in childhood". This state initiative is implemented within the framework of the North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Prevention Concept of the State Health Conference and is funded by the statutory health insurance funds in NRW. The initiative bundles and initiates projects which are designed for the target group of children in different environments. The trend of increasing overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence is to be counteracted by the project. In addition, children/families with social disadvantages in particular are supported and children with a migration background are given increased support.