



Fight obesity earlier in life say MEPs

Europe has almost 22 million overweight children, and a further 1.3 million will be overweight or obese by 2010, says the European Parliament in a report adopted with 536 votes in favour and 37 against, that calls for an earlier start to measures to prevent obesity. Remedies include clearer food labelling, better food in schools and kindergartens, restrictions on advertising unhealthy food to children, and VAT reductions for fruit and vegetables.

Overweight, obesity and diet-related disease are approaching epidemic proportions, notes the own-initiative report by Alessandro **Foglietta** (UEN, IT). Obesity already accounts directly for about 6% of health spending, but the indirect costs are much higher, says the report. Obesity is one of Europe's most serious public health problems, because it significantly increases the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

MEPs advocate a multi-level, comprehensive approach to fighting obesity, and points out that there are many European research, health, education and life-long learning programmes that can help to tackle this scourge.

Fight the fat early in life

Since childhood obesity correlates closely with obesity in adults, the Commission and other stakeholders should make fighting it their priority, says the report. School curricula should be designed to ensure that physical exercise and a balanced diet become part of every child's behaviour.

MEPs also want the quality and nutritional standards of school and kindergarten meals to be improved, inter alia by providing fresh fruit and vegetables in school vending machines. They encourage the move away from selling children in schools foods and drinks that are high in salt, sugar or fat (HSSF) and of poor nutritional value, and say that sponsorship and advertising for HSSF products should be restricted and monitored.

Food labelling - MEPs call for mandatory front-of-pack labelling

The House sees comprehensive information on labels as the key to enabling consumers to choose between good, better and less good nutrition. They welcome the Commission's new proposal to revise the directive on nutrition labelling of foodstuffs, and urge that the label be made visible, clear and easily understandable to the consumer.

Curb advertising of unhealthy food to children

MEPs also ask for protected times and for restrictions on unhealthy food commercials that specifically target children, adding that such restrictions should also apply to new media such as online games, pop-ups and text messaging. Parliament views as "a

step in the right direction" the voluntary approach that the TV without frontiers Directive takes to the advertising of food of poor nutritional value to children. If 2010 review of the Directive finds that this voluntary approach has failed, then stricter measures should be brought forward, they add. MEPs also encourage media service providers to develop codes of conduct on inappropriate audiovisual commercial communication relating to food and beverage products.

Industry self-regulation good, but not good enough

MEPs stress that the food industry should do much more to tackle the problem of obesity, e.g. by offering a broader range of smaller portion options. MEPs acknowledge the role of recent industry initiatives on advertising self-regulation in fighting obesity, but note that regulation is sometimes necessary to deliver substantial and meaningful change in the industry, particular with respect to children.

EU- wide ban on artificial trans-fatty acids

The House calls for an EU-wide ban on artificial trans-fatty acids, stressing that the present state of scientific knowledge shows that excessive consumption of trans-fatty acids (over 2% of total energy intake) is linked to significantly higher cardiovascular risks.

Lower VAT rates for fruit and vegetables

MEPs call on Member States which have not yet done so to reduce VAT on fruit and vegetables, recalling that Community law authorises them to do so. Furthermore they want the Community texts in force to be amended to allow fruit and vegetables to benefit from a very low rate of VAT.

The House is convinced of the need for full regulation of the qualification of medical professionals as 'clinical dieticians' as well as 'nutritionists'.

In the November plenary session (17-20) MEPs will vote on a Commission proposal to allocate €90 million for a school fruit scheme. The Agriculture Committee will examine this proposal on 7 October.

Contact :

Constanze BECKERHOFF

E-mail: envi-press@europarl.europa.eu

BXL: (32-2) 28 44302

STR: (33-3) 881 73780

PORT: (32) 0498.983.550

Richard FREEDMAN

E-mail: press-EN@europarl.europa.eu

BXL: (32-2) 28 41448

STR: (33-3) 881 73785

PORT: (+32) 498 98 32 39