

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

The Eurobarometer: Health in Europe

The European Commission surveys European Union citizens at regular intervals. This survey forms the basis of the Eurobarometer (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2006). The Eurobarometer of November 2006, clearly shows that about three-quarters of all Europeans consider that they are in good health. The most favourable results can be seen in Denmark and Ireland, where the corresponding percentage is around 85 percent. The citizens of the new EU Member States are the most dissatisfied about their state of health. Only 52% of Latvians and Lithuanians consider their health to be good. Good health appears to be strongly associated with weight. Respondents who are overweight, and are more often less satisfied with their health and explain, that they more often suffer from a chronic illness. Moreover, health problems are associated with age and their socio-economic background.

Healthy diet: a definition

What counts for a healthy diet is the combination of foods and quantity eaten. Therefore, a healthy diet involves that we neither eat too much, nor too little (energy intake in balance with the energy consumption) and in balance with the recommended intake volume measurement (National Institute of Public Health and the Environment, RIVM, 2004).

A healthy diet provides all of the nutrients that are necessary to help the body grow and for normal development. It helps us to maintain our bodies balance and contributes to prevent illnesses caused by modern society such as overweight like heart and circulatory diseases. In addition, the body needs nutrients as building materials. Bones develop thanks to calcium, muscles and organs thanks to protein. The saying is ever so true that, "We are what we eat"

Several points should not be overlooked to avoid any misunderstandings and the danger of encouraging a lack of interest in healthy foods. For example, each European should have a minimum knowledge about the basic principles for eating a healthy diet and nutrition principles. This also means that preventive health measures and nutrition education should be started at an early age. A European study (HEMPEN 2006), examined which elements concerning nutrition are included in the national curricula of eight European countries.

When we compare these findings, it is clear that:

The food canal and information about a healthy diet and nutrients is included in all curricula. Also countries are also in favour of concrete nutrition models. The advantage of a concrete nutrition model is it concentrates on food rather than nutrients and in this way everyone can see directly what the most important components of a healthy diet are.

Various models are used in Europe. In the eight countries that participated in this European study, eight different nutrition models are used. It was noteworthy that there are two current systems in use: the Food Pyramid and the "round model". The Food Pyramid is used in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Malta and Turkey. The Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom work with the Round Model.

Eating habits

Eurobarometer findings show that the majority of Europeans (59%) eat a healthy diet; they described their diet as balanced and varied and find it very important to eat more fruits and vegetables. In response to the question about what a healthy diet means to them, most of the answers touched on topics such as low-fat food (45%), food with a low-sugar content (28%) and eating more fish (25%).

Above all, those who find that they are overweight are convinced of the importance of regularly consuming fruits and vegetables and less fats. Four out of five Europeans feel that they eat a healthy diet. Nationals of the new EU Member states are more critical in this regard. Only 55% to 60% find that they eat a healthy diet. Older persons consider that they eat a healthier diet than younger persons. Women and girls, who more often avoid fatty food, can better describe a healthier diet than boys and men.

Two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they do not find it difficult to eat a healthy diet. There are no significant differences from one Member State to another. Above all, nationals from the new EU Member States seem to eat a healthy diet (up to 54%). People who eat too much or too little, find it more difficult to eat a healthy diet than persons who fall in the normal weight range.

Two key reasons for eating an unhealthy diet are the lifestyle of Europeans and above all lack of time. The majority of those who complain about not having enough time are well-educated persons with a good socio-economic status. Persons with a lower educational level find it often boring and less meaningful to eat a healthy diet.

A change in eating habits

One out of five EU citizens went on a diet last year on their own initiative for 11% and upon the recommendation of a doctor for 8%. Women/girls diet more often than men/boys and older persons more frequently than younger persons.

One out of five Europeans stated that they changed their eating habits last year. This mostly applies to women, older persons, persons with a high educational level, employed and living in urban areas. The most important changes include eating more fruit and vegetables (55%) and less fatty foods (53%).

The most important reason cited for a diet and for a change in eating habits was the desire to lose weight. The second reason was to remain healthy. The first reason was mainly given from persons who weigh too much. The second reason was encountered more often amongst those persons who fell in the normal weight range. Sick persons and seniors mostly cite health reasons for the change in their eating habits.

Height, weight and BMI

In comparison with 2002, Europeans have become bigger. The average size is currently 169.9 cm (almost 5'7"). On the average, men are 12.3 cm taller than women. The age group of between 15 to 24 years of age is on the average 5.3 cm taller than persons over 55 years of age. The tallest Europeans live in the Netherlands (174.5 cm or about 5' 9" on the average) and in the other countries of northwest Europe. Southern Europeans are shorter. The Maltese are the shortest (164.9 cm on the average).

Not only the height, but the average weight of Europeans has risen. Often the ideal weight has been determined on the basis of beauty criteria rather than from a health point of view. The so-called 'healthy weight' is no exact weight, but much more a range of –upper and lower limits in between which one's weight must be found. This range is known as the Body Mass Index (BMI).

The BMI is calculated as follows: the weight in kilogrammes or in pounds divided by the square height (in meters or feet and inches) (NUBEL 2004):

- BMI less than 20: underweight (represents a problem when the value is less than 18.5)
- BMI between 20 and 25: ideal weight
- BMI between 25 and 30: overweight

- BMI more than 30: obesity (obesity)

The Eurobarometer shows that the average Body Mass Index (BMI) for Europeans is 25.0. With the exception of the Maltese, the population of the new EU Member States as well as Northern European countries have the highest BMI (i.e. an average BMI of 26.6). Italians (an average BMI of 24.3) and the French (an average BMI of 24.5) have the lowest BMI values.

Europeans have a relatively good impression about their weight. About 55% are satisfied with their weight. In this regard, women are generally more critical than men. More women (44%) than men (32%) feel that they are too fat. Those who feel that they weigh too much, in general also have a BMI that is too high of 28. On the other hand, those who are not satisfied with their weight, have an average BMI of 23. Persons with higher BMI often have more health disorders.

An important goal of the nutrition model is the intake of energy in the same amount as our daily needs. The following important rule applies here: what is consumed must also be used up.

In order to calculate the necessary amount of energy for an individual, first the basal metabolic rate (BMR) is determined (the necessary quantity of energy at rest). This is calculated according to a person's weight. Differences arise on the basis of gender and age. A woman has a daily energy requirement of 2,000 Cal (8360 kJ), while a man requires 2,500 Cal (10450 kJ).

According to advice from the HOGE GEZONDHEIDSRAAD: Eat according to your needs. Adapt your portions accordingly and give priority to low-calorie foods. Make sure that, every day, you have physical activity that is equivalent to 30 minutes of active walking. (HOGE GEZONDHEIDSRAAD, 2006).

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