

Nutrition and diet for healthy lifestyles in Europe: the 'Eurodiet' Project

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Abstract

The aims of this project are to formulate a strategy and action plan for developing and implementing European dietary guidelines. The project is supported by DGV/F/3 and was initiated in October 1998. The work plan has entailed the formation of Working Parties composed of prominent experts from the member states to prepare consensus documents on the state of the art in Europe and the added value of European population-based guidelines. These groups are addressing 4 inter-linked components of the project: (1) evaluation of the role of diet and lifestyles in health & disease patterns in Europe; (2) the feasibility of developing an EU-wide framework for food-based dietary guidelines; (3) public health nutrition strategies for implementing FBDGs and for enhancing physically active lifestyles in Europe and (4) an evaluation of policy, trade, economic and technological aspects to improving nutritional status and lifestyles in the EU. Stakeholders from the spectrum of interests involved are invited to assess and debate the science and policy implications of these documents, which will be presented at a European Conference in May 2000. Recommendations in the form of a practical, evidence based policy document will be presented to the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament.

Keywords
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Public health nutrition priorities have, historically, focused on the prevention of nutritional deficiency states: undernutrition and vitamin and mineral deficiency diseases. The turning point for dietary guidance came in the 1970s with the gaining recognition that nutrition can play a crucial role in the etiology of chronic diseases (initially CAD)-and the associated concept that once dietary related risk factors of chronic diseases could be identified, they may also be preventable. It is now increasingly recognized that many health problems and diseases have a nutritional base or are promoted by inappropriate dietary habits.

Europeans are currently subject to a barrage of information, claims and confusing messages concerning the beneficial/harmful properties of particular nutrients, foods, diets, additives, vitamins and minerals on health. Factors contributing to this include the large and progressively developing body of scientific evidence from nutrition and food safety perspectives as well as multiple and rapid developments in food supply and products, spanning the spectrum from primary producers through to processors, retailers and the catering sectors. Apart from food safety laws, member state authorities have formulated dietary and healthy food guidelines: these are at varying levels of sophistication, and there are multiple regional, national, European and international agencies and

NGOs working in parallel to promote varying aspects of healthier lifestyles.

The net effect: confusing messages from the scientific/medical community, from policy makers, and from the food industry which inhibit informed consumer choices on diet and nutrition to promote healthier lifestyles.

The Eurodiet project was commissioned against this background and initiated in October 1998. The aims are to formulate a strategy and action plan for developing and implementing European dietary guidelines.

This is a 2-year project supported by DGV/F/3 under the Community Action Program on health promotion, information and training, and is coordinated by the University of Crete. Project participants include leading scientists from the Member States and EEA countries, policy advisers and representatives from national and European agencies, from FAO and WHO, and NGOs concerned with health promotion, food and nutrition – including representatives from the food-chain industry and from educational, medical and consumer organizations.

The work plan has entailed the formation of Working Parties composed of prominent experts from the member states to prepare consensus documents on the state of the art in Europe and the added value of European population-based guidelines¹. These groups

are addressing the 4 inter-linked components of the project, which can be abbreviated as (1) Health and Nutrients; (2) Nutrients and Foods; (3) Foods and People and (4) People and Policies.

Specifically, the remits are as follows:

1. The role of diet and lifestyles in health & disease patterns in Europe

Evidence of the links between diet and chronic diseases and disorders will be examined – notably: cancer, coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, iodine deficiency disorders, iron deficiency, osteoporosis, dental health, and the avoidance of congenital abnormalities. There are multiple mechanisms, but common themes are inclusion of fruit and vegetables, physical inactivity, fetal nutrition and smoking. The Working Party will review the scientific evidence with a view to providing clear messages with a sound scientific base on the role of diet and lifestyle habits in health and disease patterns in Europe. This Working Party supplies the critical background information for the other 3 Working Parties.

2. A framework for food-based dietary guidelines in the European Union

The Working Party will draw on work undertaken by the Institute of European Food Studies (IEFS) on a comparison of prevailing nutrient intakes with the dietary guidelines in each EU state and will develop a framework of principles for establishing food-based dietary guidelines in the EU. This will also draw on the FAO/WHO report on food-based dietary guidelines which were developed as a result of the *1992 International Conference on Nutrition*². Expected outcome: a framework for food based dietary guidelines which can be developed appropriately in terms of the prevailing health and cultural dietary profiles of European populations at regional and/or national level³.

3. Toward a public health nutrition strategy in the European Union to implement FBDGs and to enhance healthier lifestyles

The Working Party will identify strategies for implementing food-based dietary guidelines and for enhancing healthier lifestyles, particularly physical activity. The principles underlying such strategies will take account of existing pan-EU data on determinants of food choice and on consumer attitudes to nutrition, physical activity

and health. The Working Party will also examine specific health promotion strategies for specific population sub-groups. Expected outcomes: strategies for implementing FBDGs and for enhancing healthier lifestyles in Europe.

4. Policy, trade, economic and technological aspects of improving nutritional status and lifestyles in the European Union

Alterations in the existing balance of nutrients in the EU diet will require changes in food supply, in retail distribution and in catering practices among other things. Equally, the nutrient content of existing foods can be improved through technology, including gene technology. Such changes may be limited by existing trade and policy issues. The Working Party will seek to identify barriers and opportunities and will consider alternative strategies. Existing urban and rural environment and transport policies, among others, also need to be examined in respect of improving physical activity. Expected outcome: evaluation of significant policy, trade, economic and technological barriers to and opportunities for improving nutrient status and physically active lifestyles in the European Union.

The science and policy implications of these documents will be assessed and debated at a European Conference, to be held on 18–20 May 2000 in Crete, Greece.

The Conference provides an opportunity

- to review achievements
- to assess and debate the way forward and
- to consider the contributions that can be made by the spectrum of interests involved in this important area of public health.

Expected outcome: practical, evidence based policy document that will be presented to the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament.

References

- 1 Comparative National Nutrition Policies in Europe: An International Expert Conference for the World Health Organization. *Nutrition Reviews* **55**: (11) (Part II), November 1997.
- 2 FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition: major issues for nutrition strategies. 1992; Italy. FAO/WHO.
- 3 FAO/WHO Preparation of Food-Based Dietary Guidelines. 1998; Geneva: WHO.