



# 1<sup>st</sup> European Parliamentary Day On Diets and Health

## Fighting against obesity: Promoting healthy diets and physical activity



On October 18, 2007 the European Parliament will host the 1<sup>st</sup> European Parliamentary Symposium dealing with the fight against obesity. This event will be chaired by Frédérique Ries, MEP and writer of the parliamentary report: *“Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases”*.

**PREVENT** 9:30 am – Round Table 1: Preventing obesity with education, physical activity and information to the consumers

11:00 am – Round Table 2: Fostering healthy diets thanks to food diversity

**TREAT** 2:30 pm - Round Table 3: Treatment

3:45 pm – Round Table 4: Regulation and self-regulation

On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007, the Members of the European Parliament adopted the report of their Belgian colleague Frédérique Ries. This report supports the idea of increased efforts to better inform and above all educate consumers. It also fosters healthy diets and regular physical activity from the earliest ages. The report also aims at recognising obesity as a chronic disease to avoid blaming people who suffer from it and grant them access to the necessary healthcare.

### FIRST OBSERVATION: ALARMING FIGURES

In her report, Frédérique Ries raises the alarm about obesity. European figures are indeed staggering: **38% of women are affected, 27% of men and over 5 million children are concerned by this illness**. According to Markos Kyprianou, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, **this could be the major health threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**.

#### Key figures in 2006

##### World

400 million obese people  
1.6 billion overweight people

##### Europe

About 22 million European children are overweight, 5 millions are obese.

7% of the European health budget : higher than the cost of tobacco-related diseases

This scourge affects people unevenly. Poorest populations are the most affected. Women are also more likely to have weight problems following pregnancy and menopause. Their timetables are often too booked to allow time for sports.


There are also geographical discrepancies between Northern Europe, where the stats show between 10 and 20% of obese children, and Southern Europe as well as the UK where figures reach 20 to 35%.

At the same time, one observes a decrease in the consumption of fruit and vegetables in Europe. This is partially due to the price of fresh products but also to the change in our eating habits over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We have gone from a situation where we ate local products to a situation where we eat a lot of processed foods.



## PREVENTION THROUGH FOOD EDUCATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY


In order to stop this epidemic, it is essential to pay particular attention to these issues from the earliest ages when children actually take their food habits. Parents and schoolmasters must become priority targets for the governments' educational actions: developing taste, promoting physical activities and a healthy lifestyle.



**School** is the place where children spend most of their time. The European Parliament thus wishes that the 27 Member States provide the necessary funds to meet demanding nutritional standards: meals including organic or regional fruit and fresh vegetables and a reduction in fat foods and additives served in the school cafeterias.


**Physical activity** must also become a major school activity for children. As a result, schools will have to plan daily activities and fight against the reduction of the time dedicated to physical activity. The European Parliament recommends the promotion of healthy transportation modes as well as exercise on the workplace (at least 30 minutes a day). For their part, the mayors are encouraged to foster mobility in their cities thanks, for instance, to bicycle or walking.

## TOWARDS RECOGNISING OBESITY AS A CHRONIC DISEASE



The scientific and medical approach has allowed to learn more about the psychological and physiological factors causing obesity. According to Marie-Laure Frelut, Paediatrician at the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul hospital in Paris, 30% of the factors would be genetic and 70% would come from environmental factors causing people to gain weight.

A lot of progress has been made but not all these new steps forward are included into the policies. The scientific world has proved the negative impact of artificial trans fatty acids on human health but only a few countries such as Canada or Denmark have taken the initiative to suppress them from their diets.



Obesity, in particular when there is excessive abdominal fat, favours the development of severe diseases including heart pathologies, maturity onset diabetes and high blood pressure. Obesity can also favour some types of cancer.


The disease and its consequences are now better understood thanks to the research programmes. The design of new drugs is also a source of hope. Belgium recently decided to refund the placement of a gastric ring for patients suffering from morbid obesity.

Frédérique Ries wishes **obesity to be recognised as a chronic disease** in order to avoid stigmatisation of obese people and to favour adequate treatments. To this end, it is necessary to raise the awareness of the medical staff, foster the detection of people at risk and support a psychological approach to the disease.




## « RESTRAINING » THE AGRESSIVE MARKETING METHODS?

**The advertising sector must also take its responsibilities** because it influences the children' food preferences by using new types of advertising techniques specifically designed for them (SMS, on-line games, sponsoring playgrounds etc.). This is a fact although the final buying decision is taken by **the parents**.




A study made by the French Consumers' Association UFC "Que choisir" shows that in 2006, following the application of the law on public health dated August 9, 2004, the pressure of advertising remained very high. It also shows that **89% of TV ads promoted imbalanced foodstuffs**.

Constraint or encouragement, this is an open question. Some countries levy taxes on adverts promoting products that are too fat or too sweet. Others, such as the UK, Finland and Sweden,



have imposed a stringent labelling system to the distributors of some foodstuffs. As to the European Union, it chose in May 2007, on the occasion of the review of the “Television without Borders” directive, a restriction on the advertising aiming at children (foodstuffs with high concentrations in fats, salts or sugars) submitted to the voluntary code of conduct.


#### FOR A STRONG COMMITMENT FROM COMPANIES, EUROPE AND THE MEMBER STATES



Frédérique Ries is asking the European Union to get fully involved into the fight against obesity. EU tools already exist, they only need to be given a new orientation: it is necessary to activate the structural funds to cut the link between poverty and obesity and create mechanisms within the Common Agricultural Policy that will reduce the prices of dairy products, fruit and vegetables.

She also believes that actions that are successful in a given Member State or region should be adapted at the European level and be funded accordingly.

Solving the problem unavoidably lies in an increased cooperation between all the concerned stakeholders. The agri-food sector and the major retailers have obviously a major role to play in order to modify some eating habits and meet the consumers’ expectations for healthy, diversified and affordable products.



The media speak about the overweight problem on a daily basis: pharmaceutical research, debates on fast-food, reduction of the time dedicated to physical activities, the diktat of the look and the arrogance of the advertisements, professional and social discrimination (an obese person has 57% of chances of having a friend who becomes obese and 70% when it is a person of the same gender), cardiovascular diseases and economic burden (on average 7% of the national health budgets).

It is urgent to react and **this symposium aims at providing an assessment of the situation, bringing into light some existing and efficient solutions and at debating the initiatives and regulations to be implemented at the European level.**

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#### Initiatives of the European Commission

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- March 2005: launch of a European platform on diets, physical activity and health
  - November 2006: creation of a European charter on the fight against obesity to stop the epidemic
  - May 2007: writing of a White Paper on the European strategy to counter the problems linked to nutrition, overweight and obesity.