

# Health and Behavior

## Introduction

Eating less, keeping fit(exercising), no smoking, less drinking. These are all well known examples of advices for healthy living that, if they were followed, would lead to considerable health benefits. However, there is a big difference between knowing what to do and actually doing the right things. This is the central issue of this report.

## What is the problem?

In spite of the fact that knowledge about health risks is growing, and that the government has invested a lot in health promotion, more and more people are living unhealthy. This has grave implications. The government is not only looking for ways to change this unhealthy behavior, but also trying to establish who should be responsible for this change.

## Being overweight and obesity

An important and increasing health problem is that of being overweight and obesity. In the Netherlands more than 40% of people are overweight, 10% are obese. The Netherlands seems to follow the trend in the USA at a distance of about 10 years. In the meantime the figures in the US show 56% overweight and 22.5% obesity. In the past 20 years the percentage of overweight children between ages 5 and 11 has increased dramatically from 4% to 10%. The incidence of obesity in that group even increased eightfold in 20 years. Most conspicuous is the increase of overweight in very young children (from age 3).

Being overweight and obese occurs more in certain groups of the population. For example, people with little education are 4 times more likely to have obesity than highly educated people. The amount of overweight and obese immigrants is comparable to the American situation. Especially in Turkish and Moroccan children, the percentages of being overweight and obese are more than twice the percentage in Dutch children of comparable age intervals.

## Health risks

Being overweight and obese are an important health problem, because it can cause lower quality of life and a sharply increased risk of diseases and death. Being overweight and obesity increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes mellitus type 2 (even overweight children are likely to contract this 'infirmity of old age'), some kinds of cancer (especially of the large intestine), affections of the locomotory system (arthritis) and psychological complaints. Being overweight and obese has a greater impact on the amount of chronic conditions than smoking or alcohol abuse.

## The cost of unhealthy living

All forms of unhealthy living lead to an increase of care consumption and therefore to an increase in costs. The direct costs – in costs of healthcare – of smoking, lack of exercise, unhealthy eating habits and use of alcohol amount to about EUR 1.4 billion per year, i.e. 4% of the total health budget. The cost of smoking for employers is at least EUR 300 million per year. This is mainly caused by an increase in sick leave.

The direct costs of obesity are estimated at EUR 0.5 billion, while indirect costs (such as costs of sick-leave, loss of production, benefits and social costs) are estimated at EUR 2 billion.

### **Promoting healthy living**

To adjust unhealthy behavior is very difficult. Behavior is not just a conscious choice of lifestyle. Genetic predisposition and environmental aspects, such as social, physical and economical circumstances are also determining factors.

According to the Council, appropriate measures should not only be aimed at changing behavioral patterns of citizens, but also aimed at influencing the possibilities for others – like the government, the health insurer, the employer, other private parties – to change environmental aspects. The message of this report is simple, the implementation is complex and needs time: to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

### **Premises of policy**

It is the Council's opinion that people are primarily responsible for their own health. Furthermore the Council thinks that it is the public and constitutional responsibility of the government to promote healthy living, and that other parties have the social responsibility to prevent unhealthy behavior and stimulate healthy living.

Health interest and self-interest of people are the main arguments to promote healthy living. Higher or lower costs of care caused by (un)healthy living are not a decisive argument.

### **What measures should government take?**

Health advice and measures aimed at influencing behavior are all right, as long as healthy living is not forced on people, for instance by exclusion of care or financial punishment. Not only is there insufficient evidence for the effectiveness of such measures, they are also controversial. Price-increasing measures, such as a health tax on unhealthy foodstuffs, have practical problems and social burdens attached to it, which make an introduction undesirable. Some aspects, like effectiveness, proportion, and social impact of these measures, should be researched before deciding on implementation.

### **General measures**

According to the Council, the government, i.e. the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sports, should take the following measures to promote healthy living:

1. Offer correct and trustworthy information on healthy living, using contemporary means.
2. Research the use of multimedia-technology to see if it could lead to change in behavior and to a decreasing of socio-economic health differences.
3. Commit other ministries to cooperation on communal territories, such as health at the workplace.
4. Increase cooperation and attunement between policy-fields within the ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, such as sports, youth, health and social policy.
5. Support and finance cooperation on a local level, between e.g. local council, public health, education, welfare, homecare and primary care.

## **Specific measures**

To diminish the growing incidence in being overweight and obesity, government should take the following measures.

1. Create a national committee to attack obesity, that will formulate and work out specific strategies to tackle the problem of overweight and obesity efficiently and effectively.
2. Continue mass-media campaigns. They remain necessary for agenda setting, awakening of national consciousness and increasing knowledge, but they have to be accompanied by measures specifically aimed at the environment and at achieving commitment of all parties.
3. Prepare regulating guidelines for commercials and media that stimulate unhealthy living – especially in children.
4. Stimulate and support local governments to develop policy strategies aimed at the prevention of being overweight and obesity, based on the Collective Prevention and Public Health Act.
5. Provide priority in measures that stimulate physical exercise in furnishing public space.
6. Stimulate and subsidize sport and exercise in the community, at work and at school. Extend PE-classes with an extra hour per week.
7. Formulate guidelines for the signaling and advising of and healthcare for children being overweight.
8. Stimulate health promotion as a task for curative care.
9. Invest in scientific research into effective measures to achieve prevention of obesity and being overweight.
10. Subsidize healthy foods in school canteens.
11. Stimulate employers to execute an active health promotion policy, and offer them support and guidance.
12. Stimulate health insurers to invest in the healthy living of their insurants.