



Risk Prevention Begins in Childhood

- **Platform Nutrition and Physical Activity has already begun with small children**
- **Interplay of various social groups is indispensable**
- **Advertising has a substantial influence on eating behaviour**

Proper nutrition is learned in childhood – or not. This realisation was one of the key conclusions of a round of high-ranking experts who discussed the issue “New Approaches for the Promotion of Healthy Nutrition and Physical Exercise” in the scope of the European Health Forum Gastein, the most important health policy event in the EU. “For this reason awareness of health and nutrition must become an integral element of education,” says Erik Harms, head of the German initiative “Platform Nutrition and Physical Activity”. “Health education must therefore occur simultaneously with all other stages of socialisation, which is why we are concentrating our efforts on pre-school age children and their families.”

As evident as the enormous consequences of obesity during preschool years are for experts – the extremely overweight 10 to 15 percent of all children live with a disproportionately above-average risk of long-term obesity and all the known damages which result from it – risk awareness in the families affected by it is just as scarce. “As a rule, alarming health-related behaviour does not begin with conscious acceptance of the risks, but with the dangers not being recognized at all,” says Harms.

One problematic role is played by the food industry, and particularly in food advertising targeting children. “The nutritional culture promoted by the food industry stands in diametrical opposition to what is desirable for health and what has long been consistently demanded by experts,” say the authors of a British study on the influence of advertising on the eating behaviour of children.

Advertising concentrates on the “big five” in the food industry – all of which are alarming from the perspective of health:

- Sugary breakfast cereals
- Soft drinks
- Sweets
- Snack foods
- Fast food

As a countermeasure, the study’s author, Gerard Hastings, demands categorisation of foods according to health criteria and stricter regulations for the marketing of food. “This is not only an issue of classic advertising but also of merchandising, packaging, distribution channels and pricing. We know from the tobacco industry that a major impact can be achieved this way and that in regard to the healthy nutrition of children it is truly overdue.”

Measures to promote healthy nutrition and physical exercise are being taken on a European level as well in order to counter the progression of the adiposity epidemic. The most recent example of this is the European Platform on Diet, Nutrition and Physical Activity which was established in March this year. Broader European organisations from the food industry, consumer groups, health NGOs, advertising business and media have combined in this platform with the aim of implementing concrete, verifiable measures.

Further information or abstracts from the lectures at the Forum 1 / Nutrition:

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