

Government Resolution

ON DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH- ENHANCING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION

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SUMMARY

Lifestyles, such as nutrition and physical activity, play a key role for health promotion and prevention of chronic diseases. A healthy diet and sufficient physical activity can effectively prevent many diseases and at the same improve both functional ability and perceived health. A very topical issue is the important role nutrition and physical activity play in preventing obesity and type 2 diabetes that are also strongly gaining ground in Finland.

Successful health promotion and disease prevention can produce direct saving and curb the growth of health expenditure. The most significant economic effects are, however, gained from improved workforce availability and performance due to better population health.

The Committee for Health-Enhancing Physical Activity and the National Nutrition Council have together with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health prepared the Government resolution and the plan for its implementation for the term of office of the present Government. The Advisory Board for Public Health, the National Sports Council, and the Advisory Board on Occupational Health Care also took part in the work. Cooperation between different administrative sectors and interest groups has been of key importance.

The main targets of the promotion of health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition defined by the Government are the promotion of population health and the prevention of diseases so that

- 1) the number of people that pursue physical activities sufficiently for health benefits increases and the number of people marginalised from physical activity decreases
- 2) the number of people following nutrition recommendations grows through increasing the intake of vegetables, fruits, and berries and through decreasing the intake of saturated fat, salt, and sugar

- 3) overweight and obesity as well as other health problems related to
 - nutrition and physical inactivity decrease
- 4) dietary and physical activity habits that promote health become more
 - common especially among population groups with the lowest socio-economic status.

Health-enhancing physical activity and healthy diets are promoted by

- 1) influencing culture, living environment, circumstances, products, and
 - structures
- 2) ensuring that all population groups have sufficient information and skills
 - for a health-enhancing lifestyle
- 3) encouraging, supporting, and guiding individuals and communities, especially the most vulnerable.

The resolution includes targets and development guidelines for different age and population groups (children and young people, students and people of working age as well as elderly people) that can be used in local decision-making, other developing of the everyday environment, training of different occupational groups as well as in monitoring and research.

A concrete plan for the implementation of the different target areas has been drawn up for 2008–2011, i.e. for the term of office of the present Government. The implementation of the resolution is coordinated and followed up by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in their spheres of authority as well as by the Committee for Health-Enhancing Physical Activity and the National Nutrition Council as advisory bodies.

Key words: health, health promotion, nutrition, physical activity

BACKGROUND

Remarkable improvements have been achieved in the Finnish public health through influencing for example lifestyles and risk factors for diseases. However, physical activity and dietary habits have not in all respects developed enough towards the desired direction. Successful application of current research could significantly improve health among Finns and diminish the existing differences in health between population groups.

Statements by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international actors¹ underline the significance of lifestyles, such as nutrition and physical activity, have for health promotion and prevention of chronic diseases. A healthy diet and sufficient physical activity can effectively prevent many diseases and at the same improve both functional ability and perceived health.

Nutrition and physical activity have the most potential in the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, several cancers, and musculoskeletal disorders. According to a survey² carried out by the National Public Health Institute, successful health promotion and disease prevention can produce direct savings. The most significant economic effects are, however, gained from improved workforce availability and performance due to better population health and from curbing the growth of costs incurred by health care and health problems.

Obesity as a public health problem has grown rapidly during the last few decades in Finland. A significant factor contributing to this has been the decline in occupational, transportation, and household physical activity. A

1 WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, 22 May 2004; WHO Declaration on Counteracting Obesity, 2006; Action Plan on health, food and physical activity released by the Nordic Council of Ministers on 6 June 2006; EU White Paper on A Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues, 30 May 2007; Second WHO Action Plan for Food and Nutrition Policy; 20 September 2007; and a Draft for a White Paper on Sport.

2 National Public Health Institute report to the Economic Council, 11 December 2006

very topical issue is the important role nutrition and physical activity play in preventing type 2 diabetes, which is strongly gaining ground also in Finland. Already around half a million Finns have type 2 diabetes, which has many serious health effects. WHO estimates that as much as 90 per cent of type 2 diabetes can be prevented with sufficient physical activity and a healthy diet. It is of particular concern that overweight and obesity, which are linked with diabetes and many other health problems, and physical inactivity are common in all age groups and on the increase especially among children and young people.

With its intersectoral policy programme for health promotion, the Government emphasises that health is one of the most important values for people as well as an important cornerstone of economic, social, and human development. Reducing overweight is a specific target in the programme. The Government Programme also underlines the significance physical activity and healthy and safe Finnish food have on well-being. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health answers for the policy programme for health promotion and for its implementation in collaboration with other ministries. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the policy programme on the well-being of children, youth and families. In terms of physical activity, the guidelines of the national programme for sport and physical activity are also important. The programme also includes proposals for developing health-enhancing physical activity.

Among the objectives of the Sports Act (1054/1998) are promotion of the well-being and health of the population and support for the growth and development of children and young people through sports and physical activity. The Ministry of Education answers for the general management, development, and coordination of sports administration in collaboration with the Government. The National Sports Council is the expert body at the Ministry of Education in tasks relating to the Sports Act. The local government must promote sports and physical activity among the municipal residents by developing health-enhancing physical activities, enhancing civic activities, investing in sports facilities, and by organising sports and physical activity with due regard to special groups.

According to the Primary Health Care Act (66/1972), the local government is responsible for public health work in its area, including health promotion targeted at individuals, the population, and the living environment. The local government must, for instance, provide health education for municipal residents and see to that health aspects are considered in all municipal activities. It must also cooperate with other public and private actors in the municipality so as to promote health.

In the field of nutrition, the food legislation aims especially at ensuring that food is safe and that consumers find sufficient up-to-date information on food items. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry answers for the legislation, which is then monitored by the Finnish Food Safety Authority Evira. Healthy public nutrition is chiefly the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The Ministry is assisted by the National Public Health Institute with its broad-based expertise and research on nutrition and health, its national nutrition surveillance system, and its food composition database.

Health-enhancing physical activity and healthy diets as well as supportive environments are developed and implemented by several administrative sectors and many different actors. For example the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of the Environment, and several government agencies have taken part in the work. In addition to the public sector, organisations, and to an increasing degree the industry and commerce are important actors in developing health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition. The *Health in All Policies* approach, approved by the EU on Finnish initiative, supports well the target of promoting physical activity and healthy diets among the population through different kinds of decisions and activities in society.

TARGETS

The main targets of the national promotion of health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition defined by the Government are the promotion of population health and the prevention of diseases so that

- 1) the number of people that pursue physical activities sufficiently for health benefits increases and the number of people marginalised from physical activity decreases
- 2) the number of people following nutrition recommendations grows through increasing the intake of vegetables, fruits, and berries and through decreasing the intake of saturated fat, salt, and sugar
- 3) overweight and obesity as well as other health problems related to nutrition and physical inactivity decrease
- 4) dietary and physical activity habits that promote health become more common especially among population groups with the lowest socio-economic status.

Physically active lifestyles and diets conforming to nutrition recommendations are promoted in all population groups. A specific emphasis is put on reducing differences between population groups in accordance with the Health 2015 Programme and the guidelines in the National Action Plan to Reduce Health Inequalities.

INFLUENCING TOOLS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Health-enhancing physical activity and healthy diets are promoted by

- 1) influencing culture, living environment, circumstances, products, and structures
- 2) ensuring that all population groups have sufficient information and skills for a health-enhancing lifestyle
- 3) encouraging, supporting, and guiding individuals and communities, especially the most vulnerable.

Health should be taken into account in all decision-making and at different arenas so that the living environment becomes healthier and healthy choices are possible, easy, and attractive. The implementation of the resolution requires that different actors have a clear mutual understanding of the recommendations, key targets, and activities for health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition.

The development of health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition is allocated more resources than at present by redistributing existing lottery and slot machine profits. Different administrative sectors must allocate the necessary appropriations in order to implement this resolution. Public and private sector collaboration that supports the resolution targets should be increased with regard to project implementation and financing.

Different administrative sectors must continue and intensify their cooperation, reach agreements on responsibilities, and ensure the sustainability and appropriate use of resources. High-quality research and comprehensive monitoring systems and the continuous utilisation of information thus generated are needed as a basis for measures. Successful collaboration between different administrative sectors and the third sector requires effective interaction. Reaching the targets must, if necessary, be enhanced with legislation, also within the European Union, and physical activity and nutrition must also be promoted at international forums.

In accordance with the resolution, measures are prepared and implemented and ministries' activities are intensified as follows:

I PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION IN DIFFERENT AGE AND POPULATION GROUPS

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

TARGETS

- 1) Children, young people and families are offered more information, support, and opportunities to adopt physically active lifestyles and healthy dietary habits.
- 2) The daycare and school environments and their operating cultures support physically active lifestyles and healthy dietary habits.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Guidance centres, daycare, and school are key development priorities since they reach nearly all children, young people and families with children. Co-operation with the third sector, in particular with public health organisations and physical activity clubs and sports clubs, should be developed. Everyone should have access to physical activities and healthy diets. Attention must be specifically directed at children and youth with special needs.

Guidance centres and school health services must have sufficient and skilled staff as well as tools to assess the dietary and physical activity habits of families with children, detect lifestyle-related problems, and provide guidance. Daycare and school must support the adoption of healthy lifestyles

and they must be health-enhancing environments. In daycare the child must have the opportunity to play and pursue versatile physical activity in accordance with the recommendations for physical activity in early childhood education and care. The amount of physical activity during the school day must be increased and the importance of healthy nutrition during the school day must be highlighted. Teaching in physical activity and nutrition should be a natural part of other school subjects. Increasing the amount of physical activity during the school day conforms to the guidelines of the national programme for sport and physical activity. The food served in daycare centres and schools must be tasty and in accordance with nutrition recommendations. Moreover, enough time must be reserved for dining.

The implementation of the recommendations for physical activity and nutrition in early childhood education and care and the quality recommendations for school health care, the recommendations for school meals, and the recommendations for the physical activity of school-aged children is intensified through collaboration with various actors and through the steering and monitoring carried out by them. Health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition must be taken into account in the drafting and implementation of decrees on guidance centre activities, school health services, and student health services.

Food marketing to children and young people should not be contradictory with health promotion messages. If necessary, the state will create regulatory systems alongside corporate self-regulation that restrict marketing of unhealthy foods to children and young people and ensure efficient monitoring of the regulations.

The above-described guidelines support the targets of the policy programme for the well-being of children, young people and families, the national programme for sport and physical activity, and the programme to promote Finnish food.

STUDENTS AND PEOPLE OF WORKING AGE

TARGETS

- 1) Students and people of working age have the possibility to get support and incentives for lifestyle changes that improve their work and functional ability, well-being, and weight maintenance.
- 2) Increasing numbers of students and people of working age have the possibility for tasty meals during the workday that comply with nutrition recommendations.
- 3) Employers have access to efficient incentives for increasing physical activity among their employees.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Support and incentives that promote healthy lifestyles and weight maintenance must be developed for students and people of working age. A particular development target is vocational education institutions. A decree on school and student health services will ensure that with respect to school and student health services, youth are in equal position irrespective of their municipality of residence and the education institution, which they attend. Along with the development of work and study communities, systems to reach groups outside the workforce must be promoted and created.

There must be incentives and alternatives for employers to promote diverse occupational and transportation physical activities among their workforce. The opportunities for walking and cycling to and from work must be improved by providing appropriate showers and changing rooms as well as bicycle stands. The nutritional quality of food consumed by students and people of working age must be improved and its attractiveness must be enhanced with means of taxation and employment contracts. Sufficient funding for public food services must be ensured. The subsidies for staff restaurants must be developed so that they promote healthy choices. As a part of the

project to restructure municipalities and services, local governments and other actors are encouraged to create programmes and models for people of working age that support healthy lifestyles. The competence of the primary health care staff is reinforced with regard to support for lifestyle changes. Also systematic follow-up of weight and waistline development as well as support for weight maintenance are increased. Data on weight and lifestyles form an important part of the electronic patient record.

ELDERLY PEOPLE

TARGETS

- 1) High-quality, accessible, and affordable physical activity and nutrition services are sufficiently available for elderly persons.
- 2) Monitoring of the nutritional state of elderly persons is included in the service system objectives.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

It is of key importance to promote measures that increase the number of healthy and functional life years as well as the quality of life for elderly persons. There are differences in the opportunities and abilities of elderly persons to be physically active and eat food that is consistent with nutrition recommendations. Elderly persons must have access to specifically designed services, which different municipal sectors could develop in collaboration with other actors. In service provision, particular attention should be paid to elderly persons whose functional abilities are deteriorating as well as to the special needs of sparsely populated regions.

Diversified physical activity that maintains muscular strength slows down the deterioration of functional ability and therefore prolongs independent living at home. Elderly persons must have daily access to physical

activity that promotes muscular strength and balance. They should also be offered guidance on correct exercises as well as access to suitable facilities. The availability and quality of food services suitable for elderly persons must be improved along with the monitoring of the nutritional state. Ensuring the nutrition and the physical activity of elderly persons must be a part of the good care provided at home, residential homes, primary health care, and hospitals.

II EVERYDAY ENVIRONMENTS THAT PROMOTE HEALTHY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DIETARY HABITS

TARGETS

- 1) People have good opportunities for everyday physical activity and healthy dietary choices.
- 2) All age groups and population groups have access to accessible community sports facilities.
- 3) The food served by food services is consistent with dietary recommendations.
- 4) Health aspects are integrated into food product development, marketing, and product information.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Social structure, urban planning, walkways, cycle ways, and sports facilities must be developed so that they favour health-enhancing physical activity. Safe, accessible, and welcoming community sports facilities and environments encouraging to physical activity enable the daily physical activity of all age and population groups.

The importance of the nutritional quality in the food chain must be intensified and the consumers must have access to reliable information about nutrition and food items. The nutritional quality of food and its assessment must be incorporated into food services already in procurement agree-

ments. The consumers' possibilities to make healthy dietary choices are improved by influencing food product information at the national and the international level. Taxation means are applied both in retail trade and in food services to promote alternatives that conform to nutrition recommendations. The concept of corporate social responsibility must be interpreted so that corporations demonstrate their responsibility for the population health and lifestyles with concrete measures. Corporate social responsibility is seen in the selection of products corporations sell and market.

Health promotion is also integrated into the programme to promote Finnish food launched in the Government Programme.

III HEALTH-ENHANCING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION IN DECISION-MAKING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

TARGETS

- I) The Health in All Policies approach is taken into account in decision-making and measures, which are linked with the obligation to Health Impact Assessment.
- 2) Health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition play a central role in municipal welfare policy.
- 3) Guidance services on physical activity and nutrition are sufficiently available within the primary health care.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Local government decision-making must take into account factors affecting the nutrition and physical activity of the municipal residents. The restructuring of municipalities and services must ensure that nutrition and physical activity are key priorities and that they are taken into account in the structures for the promotion of well-being and health. The impact of decisions on the residents' health should be assessed.

The status of health-enhancing physical activity as a municipal basic service must be reinforced in the municipalities and it has to be included

in the local government well-being and municipality planning. The municipal welfare policy plans must define the division of responsibilities and tasks with regard to health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition. Different administrative sectors must increase their cooperation so as to promote health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition in the municipality. Also collaboration with non-governmental organisations must be intensified. Examples of effective cooperation should be distributed nationally.

The local government should secure the organisation of quality food services that conform to recommendations when municipalities and services are restructured. The local government must target public food services adequate resources that enable schools and other institutions to serve food that is consistent with nutrition recommendations. The local government must also actively instruct and supervise so as to ensure that food items conforming to nutrition recommendations are available at sports facilities and other recreation environments as well as in snack vending machines, kiosks and suchlike in schools. As the need for physical activity and nutrition guidance services is on the increase, it is important that more resources are allocated for primary health care. The municipal residents must be ensured access to professional guidance that is sufficient in terms of quantity and quality. This requires that services of professionals in nutrition and sports are available.

IV PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION IN THE TRAINING OF DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

TARGETS

- 1) Occupational groups, whose work includes guiding and instructing in healthy lifestyles, are sufficiently prepared to provide guidance on physical activity and nutrition.
- 2) Occupational groups working in food services and food production have sufficient knowledge and skills on healthy diets.
- 3) Occupational groups, whose work gives them the opportunity to influence the nutritional and physical activity environment, have sufficient knowledge of the importance of health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition and of the prerequisites for their promotion.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

The health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition approach must be reinforced in all lifestyle guidance that aims at promoting health both within the health care system and within the teaching and education sectors. Teaching in health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition must have a broad-based health promotion approach. The realisation of this requires that more basic information about the importance of physical activity and nutrition for health and well-being is incorporated into the training of professions in social welfare and health care and in teaching and education. It is also im-

portant that food service staff has and maintains sufficient dietary skills. It is important that in addition to basic skills, the professionals also are sufficiently skilled in offering guidance and in identifying problems. Sufficient and up-to-date knowledge and skills must be ensured by organising continuous professional education.

The basic and continuous education of all the occupational groups involved in community and environment planning and implementation must include sufficient information on the importance of physical activity on health as well as information on how physical activity facilities should be taken into account in the planning.

V NATIONAL MONITORING OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION AND UTILISATION OF RESEARCH

TARGETS

- 1) Efficient monitoring and assessment systems for physical activity and nutrition that encompass the entire population and key population groups are in place in Finland.
- 2) Research data is utilised in information dissemination, drafting of recommendations, development of measures, assessment, and decision-making.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Monitoring systems on physical activity, food consumption, and health status should be developed so that they also encompass children, young people and pensioners. The quality of physical activity and nutrition services must be monitored. There must be comprehensive recommendations for physical activity and nutrition in Finland that are based on international guidelines as well as a consensus about them. Monitoring systems must be developed so that they measure the implementation of the recommendations. Good practices must be distributed through various kinds of networks. Also dialogue between the research and the users of research data must be increased.

Public research funds and other resources are targeted at projects that promote the development and monitoring of health-enhancing physical ac-

tivity and nutrition. Data monitoring systems on the service system, including guidance centres and out-patient care, is developed as a part of the electronic patient record system so that they enhance the monitoring and assessment of physical activity and nutrition in different population groups.

VI IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESOLUTION AND THE IMPLEMENTATION PREREQUISITES AND MONITORING

The Government finds it important that different authorities, organisations, and local governments implement the proposals as widely as possible and non-governmental organisations in accordance with their own objectives. Resources are allocated to different administrative sectors for measures proposed in this Government Resolution.

In order to implement the resolution targets, different administrative sectors must take part in international cooperation networks and decision-making and use these to influence the preparation and implementation of regulations, policies, strategies, and programmes that promote health-enhancing physical activity and nutrition.

The implementation of the resolution is coordinated and followed up by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in their spheres of authority as well as by the Committee for Health-Enhancing Physical Activity and the National Nutrition Council as advisory bodies. The effectiveness of the measures must be followed up and assessed.