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# The obesity challenge

Is reducing sugar in chocolate milk the ultimate solution?



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**T**he rising obesity prevalence among adults and children is a serious threat to public health systems and the future generations. The recent data shows that public health policies have not been efficient to tackle this multifactorial challenge. We have seen that product reformulation and benchmarks on salt, fat and sugar reduction per food category continue to be one of the preferred options discussed by the authorities. One may ask – is a single-nutrient approach an efficient and adequate measure to fight the obesity challenge? Are we aware of data showing that reformu-

lated food makes people slimmer and healthier? And finally, should we focus on solutions without being certain of evident public health benefits? Maybe the time is ripe to look at the problem from another perspective.

## The world has an obesity problem

The recently published data of body-mass index (BMI) trends in adults in 200 countries tell us that more people in the world are now obese as opposed to underweight<sup>1</sup>. According to the latest Lancet analysis, the number of obese people globally had increased from 105 million (1975) to 641 million (2014). At the same time, the number of underweight people had increased from 330 million (1975) to 462 million (2014). If post-2000 trends continue, by 2025 the global obesity prevalence will reach 18% in men and surpass 21% in women; severe obesity will surpass 6% in men and 9% in women.

Trends in Europe are also not positive for the future generations – according to the latest WHO HBSC survey<sup>2</sup> on trends in adolescents, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has been growing in all EU regions with highest prevalence in the South (from 20.2% in 2002 to 22.5% in 2010) and the sharpest

increase in the East (from 11.5% in 2002 to 18.5% in 2010). No doubt that these trends are alarming for health authorities in Europe and around the globe.

## Product formulation & added sugar on the EU agenda

Since the beginning of 2016 we have seen an intensification of debates on how to combat the obesity challenge. It seems that policy makers tend to opt for reformulation and further reduction of 'bad nutrients' in foods and drinks. After salt and saturated fat in the previous years, the main focus of 2016 is added sugar.

In January 2016 the European Commission and EU Member States experts (High Level Group on Nutrition and Physical activity<sup>3</sup>) have endorsed a strategy on reduction of added sugars in foods and drinks – including sweetened dairy products. The new policy (so called "Added Sugar Annex") aims at setting "general benchmarks for added sugar reduction of a minimum of 10% by 2020 in food products against the Member State baseline levels at the end of 2015 or to move towards 'best in class' levels". It is worth noting that the document suggests that reduced sugar should not be replaced by sweeteners as the overall aim is to reduce the sweet taste of foods.

In parallel, the Dutch Presidency has taken up product reformulation and reduction of fat, salt and sugar as one of its

priorities – the Dutch "Roadmap for action" widely presented in February 2016 called for "combined action to make food products healthier by gradually reducing the amount of salt, saturated fat and sugar (calories)." Interestingly, among the 22 Member States who have signed the Dutch Roadmap, we will not find neither Italy nor France – countries of undisputable rich culinary heritage.

## Reflection on the role of the industry

The recent debates triggered further reflections around the duties of food and drink industry, including the products offered by dairy sector. EDA is fully engaged on nutrition and health topics with policy-makers, industry groups and other stakeholders to help make a positive impact on the overall public health.

The health and nutrition debate has always been very close to the dairy industry. Over the last years, the European dairy sector has put a lot of effort, research and resources to ensure that consumers have access to a wide range of nutritious dairy products.

It is widely recognised that milk and dairy products are an important part of the dietary guidelines and recommendations across the EU. The health benefits of milk and dairy for school children has been continuously acknowledged in the recently evaluated European School Milk Scheme<sup>4</sup>. In a Western diet, dairy products provide between 40% and 70% of the



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recommended daily calcium intake. In some Member States dairy is also one of the main natural sources of iodine in diet – the intake of iodine from milk and dairy products is up to 37%. Milk and dairy products are also natural sources of high quality protein.

### Are dairy products really high in sugars? Putting facts into a wider perspective

Dairy products are low contributors to added sugar intakes in Europe while they are high contributors of essential nutrients in all population groups. The dietary surveys show that consumption of added sugars from dairy is low and ranges between 6% (UK) to 12% (NL). At the same time dairy consumption contributes to 36% (UK) to 58% (NL) of calcium intake<sup>5</sup>. It should be considered that inadequate intakes of certain nutrients in the European diet may be partly a consequence of low dairy consumption. Adding sugar to dairy increases palatability and therefore may help consumers reach recommendations of dairy consumption. Flavoured milks and yoghurts are a way to increase milk consumption and to boost the population's vitamin, mineral and protein intake.

### What does the science say on chocolate milk and health?

In many EU countries sweetened dairy products such as flavoured fruit yoghurt and fermented milks are consumed as desserts or snacks. A number of studies show that yoghurt consumption, including flavoured ones, has a neutral or beneficial effect on weight status<sup>6,7,8</sup>. Consumption of flavoured milk has been linked to better overall diet quality without any adverse impact on weight<sup>9,10,11</sup>. Recent science also shows a positive association between yoghurt consumption, including flavoured ones, and diet quality and metabolic profile in children<sup>12</sup> and adults<sup>13</sup>. The latest science and dietary guidelines also suggest that higher intake of yoghurts, including flavoured ones, is linked to a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes<sup>14,15</sup>.

### Is the EU food and nutrition policy taking the right direction?

For many years it has been challenging to explain to the policy makers that nutrients present in food exist in combination and there is a complex interplay which is not captured by a single nutrient approach. Our diets are not composed of isolated, single nutrients but of multiple, varied and complex foods.

The focus on 'bad nutrients' in the EU food and nutrition policy might not bring the expected results. Consumers are expecting evidence-based advice on how to compose their daily diet and what products should find place on their plate. Do the policy makers take the right direction and use the best tools to tackle the obesity challenge? Is a nutrient-focused approach appropriate in the context of public health and nutrition policy? It seems that the reality is complex and this complexity needs to be adequately reflected in the health and nutrition strategy of the EU if the efficiency is at stake.

Dietary guidance and science increasingly recognise the importance of total nutrient content of food rather than of particular individual nutrients. Let's all make the effort to help

the policy makers understand that a positive approach to nutritious wholesome foods such as milk and dairy products can play an important role in fighting the obesity challenge.

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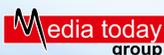
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