

Editorial

Overcoming the socioeconomic and gender gap in fruit and vegetable intake

Why is it so difficult for most people to reach the daily recommendation for fruit and vegetables? In Sweden, less than 20 percent of the adult population reaches the intake goal of 500 grams per day, and less than 10 percent of children reach their goal of 400 grams. A universal pattern can be observed across northern Europe: Intake is lower in men compared to women, in people on low incomes and in those with lower education compared to higher socioeconomic groups. Is it a matter of low availability? Is the perceived high cost of fruits and vegetables preventing desired change? Are other, less healthy foods and beverages too readily available and too cheap? Or is it a matter of lack of knowledge, skills or widespread taste preferences for sugary, fatty and salty alternatives?

The answer to these questions should guide us in the search of effective measures to increase consumption in all groups in the population.

Among higher socioeconomic groups, targeted promotional activities and health counselling is probably an adequate strategy to reduce the gender gap in consumption. However, in order to overcome the socioeconomic gap, additional instruments are needed. Social marketing employing traditional marketing elements - product, price, place and promotion - could be a way forward. One proven approach to increasing consumption is establishment of free or subsidised fruit and vegetable schemes in schools and work places. However, this might not be enough to prevent obesity and chronic diseases. Governments, municipalities and employers need to consider whether free or subsidised fruit and vegetable schemes should be made conditional upon removal of unhealthy snacks from school canteens, vending machines and cafeterias, i.e. heightening barriers for unhealthy foods and beverages competing with fruit and vegetables. In this way, environments truly supportive to health could be promoted.

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EGEA 2007 STATEMENT

European action to increase fruit and vegetable consumption

To address the growing challenge of chronic diseases - cancer, coronary heart disease and obesity - on health, the economy and development, EGEA 2007 adopted the following statement, following valuable input from Egea scientists,

- DG Health and Consumer Protection;
- DG Agriculture;
- DG Research;

and the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption is an important part of comprehensive prevention of chronic diseases. Currently only a minority of European citizens eat the daily recommended amount of 400 g of fruit and vegetables.

The WHO European Charter on counteracting obesity sets goals for curbing the epidemic and reversing the trend in children and adolescents by 2015. It recommends increasing consumption of fruit and vegetables.

The German government has given, during its Presidency, commitment to increase fruit and vegetable intake by 2010, so that 20% more people are consuming at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetable each day; and that by 2010, an extra 30% of catering (such as kindergartens, schools, cafeterias and old people's homes) serve healthy meals, which include fruit and vegetables.

The 2007 EGEA conference "The Role of Fruit and Vegetables in the Fight Against Obesity" has identified a number of effective and innovative solutions to increase consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Among these effective solutions, three main areas of action should be given priority:

- Increase access to and availability of fruit and vegetables in school.
- Improve information on the health benefits of fruit and vegetables and increase advertising for fruit and vegetables.
- Reduce social inequalities in fruit and vegetable consumption.



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The public policy of generic food marketing for fruits and vegetables

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The economics of food marketing are very different for branded products (such as Coca-Cola) and generic products (such as most spinach sold in bulk). The producer of a branded product has a strong incentive to advertise. By contrast, the producer of a generic product knows that any voluntary advertising expenditure will benefit competitors. In economic jargon, the competitors will be “free riders.”

Of course, there are some branded fruit and vegetable products (such as Dole packaged spinach, to continue the spinach example). However, at least in the United States, it is clear that product branding -- and hence voluntary advertising -- is much less prevalent in the fruit and vegetable industries than in other segments of the food market. This disparity leads to a concern that private-sector incentives favor the advertising of comparatively unhealthy foods and penalize the advertising of fruits and vegetables.

Producers of unbranded food products have sought government assistance in solving the “free rider” problem in marketing generic food products. In the case of fruits and vegetables, producer organizations, nutrition foundations, and the federal government all perceive the merit in generic marketing and promotion. One result has been the “5-a-day” and later “5-to-9-a-day” program, which is a public/private partnership that encourages consumers to increase their daily servings of all fruits and vegetables, regardless of the brand. In addition to this national partnership, some regional fruit and vegetable marketing orders include mandatory producer contributions to a marketing budget.

However, these fruit and vegetable promotion programs are only a very small part of the U.S. federal government’s interventions to help food producers solve their “free rider” problem and promote their generic products. For example, the contribution to the “5-to-9-a-day” program from the federal government’s National Institutes of Health was merely \$3.6 million in 2001. More recently, the federal participation in the program has been administered by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), but it is not clear how much money CDC commits to this effort (multiple email requests to the CDC’s program and public information offices over several weeks could not turn up a specific dollar figure).

By contrast, the federal government offers much greater help to the powerful meat and dairy industries through the federal generic commodity promotion programs, known as “checkoff” programs. As recently summarized in a longer perspective article:

The advertising campaigns from the checkoff programs include: “Beef. It’s What’s for Dinner,” “Ahh, the Power of Cheese,” “Pork. The Other White Meat,” “Got Milk?,” and the “Milk Mustache” campaign. These campaigns are so familiar that many readers will recognize the slogans immediately and be surprised only to hear that they are federally sanctioned. They are.

The programs are established by Congress, approved by a

majority of the commodity’s producers, managed jointly by a producer board and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and funded through mandatory assessments on the producers. The federal government enforces the collection of the mandatory assessments, approves the advertising and marketing programs, and defends checkoff communication in court as the federal government’s own message -- in legal jargon, as its own “government speech”⁽¹⁾.

Using the federal government’s powers of taxation, these checkoff programs collected more than \$600 million from producers in 2004. The checkoff promotions sometimes put the federal government in the awkward position of undermining the more scientifically deliberate nutrition messages of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are intended as the government’s authoritative statement on nutrition communication. For example, the Guidelines related to obesity prevention do not focus on particular nutrients, as in the “low-carb” fad diets favored by the meat industry or the “high-calcium” fad diets favored by the dairy industry. Instead, the Guidelines focus on overall calorie balance within the context of a healthy diet that is high in fruits, vegetables, and low fat dairy:

- To maintain body weight in a healthy range, balance calories from foods and beverages with calories expended.
- To prevent gradual weight gain over time, make small decreases in food and beverage calories and increase physical activity⁽²⁾.

By contrast, the federal government’s pork checkoff program relies on a low-carb dietary message, “Counting carbs? Pork’s perfect.” The federal government’s dairy checkoff program used weight loss as a central theme in the last couple years: “3-a-Day. Milk-cheese-yogurt. Burn more fat, lose weight”⁽¹⁾. Far from adhering to the Dietary Guidelines’ emphasis on lowfat dairy products, the dairy checkoff advertisements commonly promote milk and cheese without reference to fat content, and they sometimes promote products that are high in fat and saturated fat, as in the checkoff program’s recent collaboration with Pizza Hut to promote a three-cheese stuffed crust pizza or its collaboration with Wendy’s to promote the Wild Mountain Bacon Cheeseburger.

Observers of nutrition policy in the United States have some hope that the upcoming 2007 Farm Bill, which reauthorizes a wide array of agricultural and food programs, will be more favorable to fruit and vegetable production and promotion than such bills have been in the past. At the same time, the political calculation that favored meat and dairy promotion at the expense of the Dietary Guidelines in past years has not fundamentally changed. It remains to be seen whether U.S. public policy can support nutrition objectives through fruit and vegetable promotion on a scale that would noticeably compete with other subsidy programs in the agriculture budget or with other food products in the advertising marketplace.

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The interplay of 5 A Day Campaigns with food-based dietary guideline promotion

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The Plan of Action endorsed at the International Conference on Nutrition in 1992 called on governments to provide to the public “qualitative and/or quantitative dietary guidelines”¹. Subsequently, many countries developed food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG). Fruit and vegetables are an important component of a healthy diet, and their sufficient daily consumption could help prevent certain chronic diseases. To increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables in the population, several countries have programmes that promote fruit and vegetables, often under the slogan “5 A Day”. This article looks at the implementation of FBDG in Chile, Germany, New Zealand and South Africa and its interplay with the 5 A Day programme in each country. Most of the information comes from key informant interviews.

Each of these countries has a specific FBDG regarding fruit and vegetables:

Chile	Eat 2 plates of vegetables and 3 fruits every day ²
Germany	Fruits and vegetables: take 5 a day ³
New Zealand	Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits ⁴
South Africa	Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables every day ⁵

The role of 5 A Day programme in dietary guidelines implementation

In Chile, the 5 A Day programme contributes to FBDG dissemination. The activities of the public sector and the 5 A Day programme are coordinated and the same messages and materials are given to the public. The German 5 Am Tag association communicates mainly its own message, however without leaving out other important factors of a healthy diet. Governmental representatives agree that 5 Am Tag is part of the FBDG promotion, since they co-sponsor 5 Am Tag and the FBDG specifically include the “Take 5” message.

In New Zealand, from the governmental point of view the 5+ADay programme has no specific role in the implementation of the FBDG. All interviewees agreed that 5+ADay is complementary to FBDG promotion. In South Africa, a better coordination and collaboration with the public side has recently started and it is felt that 5 A Day can be the “voice” for the fruit and vegetable guideline.

The interplay of governmental FBDG implementation and 5 A Day programmes in the four case study countries

In Chile, INTA, an academic institution, promotes the FBDG and 5 A Day, which gives credibility to the programme in the population and for government collaboration. As a “neutral party”, INTA achieved a multi-sectoral dialogue and buy-in. As the 5 A Day message is included in the new FBDG, the programme gives an opportunity to use its channels to communicate all FBDG to the public, therefore diversifying the “traditional” communication channels.

In Germany, the FBDG are chiefly promoted by the BMVEL and its agencies, which are a member of or sponsor of the 5 A Day association. As in Chile, the 5 Am Tag message is part of the FBDG; hence, message and logo are included in government sponsored nutrition information, which gives a consistent picture.

In New Zealand there is no real interplay with the national government (exception: fruits in schools project), which is conscious that 5+ADay is industry lead. However, the message and number “5” is included in the government sponsored FBDG; hence there is no conflict in the messages, even though they are not promoted in a joint campaign.

In South Africa, there is reluctance from the side of the national government to interact directly with the 5 A Day Trust, even though the fruit and vegetable message is part of the FBDG. However, 5 A Day is not seen as hindering the implementation of FBDG or that it could “threaten” an overall healthy diet approach - FBDG and 5 A Day are complementary; and promoting all FBDG through the entry-points 5 A Day uses may be beneficial.

FBDG give positive and negative messages regarding a total diet. “5 A Day” only gives a positive message. Some informants pointed out that it is “easier” to give those positive messages to the population than the negative “eat less” ones. However, for a balanced diet, the 5 A Day message needs to be combined with the “instead of” message. Hence, the “bad news” needs to be part of the nutrition information given to the population as well as at the policy level. Policy makers should support fruit and vegetable promotion, but they should also focus on the “eat less” / “instead of” messages.

While not all governments endorse the 5 A Day programme, the informants concurred that these programmes are complementary to FBDG implementation and not counterproductive.

Additionally, nutrition education, as a rather “top-down” approach, is often not complemented by community involvement and/or environmental changes and FBDG are not taken into account by other public policies. 5 A Day programmes, if set-up as public-private partnerships, can have policy impact and are well situated to complement education with environmental changes. Such set-up may be conducive for overall FBDG implementation as well.



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Social Marketing Strategies to Enhance Fruit and Vegetable Consumption

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Social Marketing campaigns are similar to product marketing campaigns in that they are trying to change the attitudes and behaviors of target audiences. However, they differ in that they are generally not offering a product/service for purchase. This means that the “payoff” or reward for consumer compliance is much less tangible, it offers much less immediate gratification, and may even involve personal sacrifices and changes to deeply-ingrained habitual behaviors. For this reason, Social Marketing campaigns are required to epitomize the best practices associated with conventional marketing campaigns, and are also required to effectively tap into unmet needs, existing social drivers and core values to be persuasive.

Studies of the effectiveness of public health campaigns over the past 50 years in the United States^(1, 2, 3) indicate that success is more likely when campaign designers:

1. Conduct formative research to understand the needs and interests of the target and refine the impact of campaign messages.
2. Segment the audience into meaningful sub-groups and develop messages highly relevant to that group. Lack of segmentation and message targeting are thought to be major factors that have contributed to failed social marketing campaigns^(4, 5).
3. Ensure high message exposure in reach (how many people) and frequency (how many times they receive the message). It is important to realize that there is a minimum level of exposure to a message, below which it is unlikely to make an impact on the target audience.
4. Use multiple mediums, and generate word-of-mouth discussion about the campaign among the target group. It has been demonstrated that information obtained through word-of-mouth is considered twice as valuable as information from advertising (Keller Fay Group, 2006).
5. Mobilize credible and popular third-party groups and individuals in support of the campaign.

The Produce for Better Health Foundation – which, together with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is responsible for the extremely successful “Five-A-Day” campaign in the United States - has just launched a new campaign to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables in America. The campaign

is called “Fruits and Veggies: More Matters” and is designed to drive up adult consumption towards the goal of 9 to 11 servings (4.5-5.5 cups) of fruits and vegetables per day. In many ways, the new PBH campaign exemplifies the best practices detailed above. Notably, the campaign has:

1. Specifically targeted Gen X moms (women aged between 25 and 42 who have children under 18 years living at home), and campaign messages and mediums are designed to impact this group. This targeting is based on the understanding that these Moms are: highly engaged in their families’ health; active information-seekers; accessible through a variety of mediums; helping establish habits of a lifetime in their children; and, have a significant influence over their partners and their parents.
2. Developed messaging that reaches all Moms with an encouraging, motivational way. “Fruits and Veggies - More Matters™” is a relevant rallying call to those moms who think their families (and they) consume enough fruits and vegetables. For Moms who feel like their families eat too little, “Fruits and Veggies - More Matters™” helps them begin to address this shortfall without setting an overwhelmingly high standard.
3. Because research showed that most Gen X Moms already had a good attitude about fruits and vegetables in their families’ diets, the campaign focuses on providing them with spurs to action, including: new ways to prepare fruits and vegetables; help negotiating different fruit and veggie preferences within their family; and assistance in recognizing and managing unhealthy food messages in popular culture. Importantly, the campaign uses its interactive component to get Moms together with other Moms to exchange tips, recipes and to offer each other encouragement.
4. Cultivated various mediums for getting the word out, including not only the on-line environment, but earned media and partnerships that initially include 21,000 retail stores, more than 170 products and the U.S. public health system.

The “Fruits & Veggies -- More Matters™” campaign is also being closely measured to ensure that it is having the desired impact and to allow for its message to be strengthened over time.

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