

HEALTH NUTRITION IN THE BULGARIAN COMMUNITY – CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

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Abstract. The purpose of the present article is to present some of the contemporary approaches and priorities in the promotion of healthy eating habits in Bulgaria, in the context of the changing social reality. During the past decades, unfavourable characteristics and trends in the nutrition of the Bulgarian population have been observed. This has led to the establishment of nutrition and health strategies which conform with the recommendations of the European Union (EU) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Health nutrition habits are primarily a matter of personal choice and motivation. Therefore, it is necessary to implement a coordinated, national nutrition policy to stimulate the individual responsibility for building healthy eating habits.

Keywords: health nutrition, health promotion, contemporary approaches.

AIMS AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of the present article is to present some of the contemporary approaches and priorities in the promotion of healthy eating habits in Bulgaria, in the context of the changing social reality. The concept of health nutrition in recent years addresses global public health issues. Food is essential not only for the development, growth and maintenance of body functions, but also for quality of life. All treatments begin with prophylaxis and nutrition and are then followed by modern therapies. Insufficient, unbalanced and overindulgent nutrition has adverse effects on body function, health status and quality of life. Unhealthy eating patterns, along with other risk factors (reduced motor activity, smoking, alcohol abuse, etc.), significantly contribute to an increase in the incidence and severity of a number of chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, stroke, some types of cancers, obesity, type 2 diabetes and others.

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In this regard, a national plan 'Food and Nutrition' was developed in Bulgaria, which uses the positive experience of different countries related to the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity habits, to reduce the risk of chronic diseases for the population, and the costs and losses which they cause society. The main priorities of this plan are aimed at creating conditions for individual healthy food choices, special strategies for increasing population access to healthy foods, prevention of the production and supply of low quality foods, as well as foods contaminated with biological and chemical agents¹.

EXPERIMENTAL

A basic element of a healthy lifestyle is health nutrition, which provides the needed nutrients and microelements, improves physiological and adaptive capabilities and does not damage the body. Eating habits and the growing prevalence of obesity among the population are among the leading causes of the increasing incidence and mortality of cardiovascular diseases (CVD), some types of cancer and other diseases². One basic feature of modern preventive medicine is the claim that many of the chronic non-communicable diseases are casually related to unhealthy eating habits. Prevention of these pathological problems can, therefore, be accomplished by improving the diet and behaviour of the population³.

According to WHO data from the year 2010 for the European region, nutrition is a major risk factor contributing to the overall burden of diseases associated with the current model of nutrition and physical activity. In most countries, three out of five children and over half of the adult population are either overweight or obese⁴. Unhealthy eating habits, overweight and obesity contribute greatly to the development of chronic diseases, of which cardiovascular and oncologic diseases are the two leading causes of death in Europe. The high consumption of saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, sugar and salt and low consumption of fruits and vegetables are the leading risk factors for the severity of nutrition-associated chronic diseases⁵. Between 30 and 80% of European adult population, and more than 20% of children, are overweight, with about one-third of them being obese, which has been rising in children at particularly alarming rates. In comparison to data from the year 1970, childhood obesity has increased 10 times and has contributed to an increase in the relative share of adult obesity, which poses serious challenges to the next generation and the health system as a whole^{2,4}.

Health nutrition, improvement and maintenance of good health throughout life and prevention of diseases on the individual and population level are priorities of the health policies of the EU and the WHO European Office. The developed European platform, European strategies and programs, as well as the established European networks, are aimed at solving some basic nutritional problems of different groups of the population. The European nutrition policies have been adequately

applied in Bulgaria through the development and implementation of the national plan 'Food and Nutrition' (2005–2010). Its realisation was performed mainly by the Ministry of Health, the National Center for Public Health Protection and the Regional Health Inspectorates.

With the support of the European Regional Office of the WHO during the year 2006, a joint expert group of the Ministry of Health and the National Centre for Public Health Protection developed Recommendations for Health Nutrition for the Bulgarian Population (18–65 years), which include 12 specific messages for each population group, aimed not only at healthy eating habits, but also at maintenance of a healthy body weight and physical activity, including basic rules for quality and safety. Subsequently, national recommendations were published for nursing and feeding of infants and healthy eating habits of pregnant and breastfeeding women. All recommendations are promoted and distributed across the country⁶.

DISCUSSION

In 2014, the council of ministers accepted the Bulgarian Ministry of Health National Program for Prevention of Chronic Non-communicable Diseases (2014–2020) (Ref. 7).

The strategic goal of the national program is to improve the health and quality of life of the population by reducing premature mortality, morbidity and health consequences (invalidisation) due to the most common chronic non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular, oncologic, chronic pulmonary diseases, diabetes), associated with the risk factors – smoking, alcohol abuse, unhealthy eating habits and low physical activity. Regarding nutrition, the main objectives of the program are reinforcement of the achieved positive changes in the eating habits of the population and reduction of the risk of nutritional deficits and chronic diseases, associated with nutrition, improved distribution of foods, leading to healthy eating habits, as well as widespread access to them by the whole population. The planned activities for nutrition in the program aim to: stop the trend of increasing obesity in population; reduce the use of saturated fatty acids and industrially produced trans-fatty acids (partially hydrogenated vegetable oils) in the food supply; reduce the consumption of salt with a long-term goal of reaching a 5 g daily average per person; reduce the intake of added sugars. The nutrition activities included in the program are fully in line with those foreseen as priority areas in EU strategy papers.

Chronic non-communicable diseases can be successfully prevented to some extent. Gender, age and genetic structure are factors which can not be changed, but some of the hazards related to age and gender could 1–4, including behaviour factors – life-style (diet, physical activity, alcohol abuse, tobacco and cigarettes). These factors, on the other hand, are related to biological parameters (dislipidemy, hypertension, obesity, hyperinsulinemy), and also with socioeconomic, cultural,

environmental and occupational factors⁸. Such a policy can reduce the burden of health problems and diseases, related to foods and nutrition, as well as the costs and losses to society caused by them.

At the heart of healthy eating is an adequate and varied diet. According to the national model of nutrition and family traditions, different food groups or even food products may be associated with an increased risk of specific and non-specific diseases. Regular consumption of a variety of foods of high biological value provides the necessary nutrients and reduces the risk of eating deficiencies. In this respect, several studies among young people examined the nutritional preferences for the main food groups with a health impact^{9,10}.

Data analysis shows that the eating habits of young people do not meet the contemporary recommendations of health nutrition. Unsatisfactory nutrition characteristics include:

- Insufficient consumption of high biological value foods – whole grain bread, fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, milk and dairy products.
- Excessive consumption of confectionery foods, carbonated beverages, juices, coffee and energy drinks.
- Omission of a morning breakfast (especially in women) and the displacement of food to the second half of the day^{9,10}.

Eating habits develop early, during childhood and adolescence, often being the forerunner of health problems which occur in adult life. Taking this into account, schools can develop programs of education in nutrition, offering models of behaviour which can guide children in acquiring healthy habits¹¹.

Different severities and types of nutritional disorders and imbalances pose a serious health risk, but in practice remain undiagnosed and untreated in both hospital and outpatient care. It is well known that an adequate food intake must fully comply with the current needs of macro- and micronutrients and nutritional energy. The main modern nutrition requirements for the population are presented in the national Recommendations for Health Nutrition⁶. The national Program for Prevention of Chronic Non-communicable Diseases includes the following actions:

- Development of educational programs for health nutrition of school age children and their application in extracurricular and out-of-school activities.
- Organisation of health education events (radio and television programs, publications, press conferences, meetings, forums, competitions, festivals, exhibitions, etc.) aimed at raising awareness on health risks of nutritional deficiencies, benefits of healthy eating, special diets in different population groups (women of childbearing age, pregnant and breastfeeding women, parents, people with chronic non-communicable diseases, etc.).
- Annual organisation of public campaigns aimed at informing the population on healthy eating habits: support of breastfeeding, reduction of obesity, fight against chronic non-communicable diseases and others.

- Development of informational materials regarding health nutrition for population groups at risk (pregnant women, infants and children up to the age of 3 years, people over 65 years old, etc.)
- Printing, distribution and promotion of information materials on health nutrition to the different population and age groups⁷.

Leading institutions for the implementation of the programs are the Ministry of Health, National Centre for Public Health and Analysis and the Regional Health Inspectorates. The main partners are the Ministry of Education and Sciences, medical specialists and general practitioners⁷.

The development of food technologies has led to an expansion of the range of industrially processed foods and the creation of new foods, including genetically modified. New technologies in the food industry have an effect both on dietary intake, nutritional status and human health, and on the environment¹². Despite the revolutionary change in the organisation of medical control regarding food and nutrition, appropriate forms and actions cannot yet be found to ensure healthy eating habits and food availability to the population, which is not only safe, but also of high biological value and quality, and does not carry any risk of spreading socially significant diseases. Identifying the problems, creating and maintaining a sustained national food and nutrition policy and strategies provide an opportunity to strengthen the health and well-being of the population¹³.

CONCLUSIONS

Influenced by the global trends and the economic crisis, the eating habits of Bulgarians have undergone dynamic changes recently. The imposing trends in nutrition pose serious challenges to the promotion of healthy eating habits. The multi-sectorial nutrition policy, cooperation and joint activities of governments, society and the international community are aimed at promotion of health at all life stages, and are the key for decreasing the incidence of chronic diseases and creating a healthy lifestyle.

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