

# Going large: the fight against obesity

**In 2008, one in every five children in Switzerland was overweight. That's five times more than in 1988. Federal and cantonal governments, and public and private sectors alike are now rallying around one word – prevention – in an attempt to arrest the disturbing trend.**

By Gail Mangold-Vine | "The number of overweight and obese people has increased massively in the last few years, and the tendency is more and more prevalent in children." So says the introduction of a plan to halt this trend in its tracks, which was approved by the Swiss Federal Council on June 18, 2008.

Called the National Programme Nutrition and Physical Activity 2008-2012, the plan is based on the World Health Organization's Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (2004) and the European Charter on Counterbalancing Obesity (2006).

We asked Dr. Nathalie Farpour-Lambert, president of the Obesity Care Program at Geneva University Hospital, to characterise obesity.

"Obesity is defined by an excess of body fat. The Body Mass Index or BMI, which is based on height and weight, is a reliable indicator of body fatness. [However], with children and teens, we don't plot the readings we get the same way as we do for adults," she explains.

"[Child] obesity is defined as a BMI above the 97<sup>th</sup> percentile. A child with a BMI above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile is considered overweight," Farpour-Lambert says.

Fat children have heightened vulnerability to Type 2 Diabetes, cardiovascular problems, hypertension, and many other conditions that – even if they do not

emerge in childhood – will trouble them later, and shorten their life expectancies.

Some of the reasons for the rise in overweight and obese people in Switzerland, cited by the new National Programme Nutrition and Physical Activity plan, are that consumption of fruit and vegetables is too low, and sugar intake is way too high.

The text continues to say that "31 per cent of the population pays no attention to good nutrition; 64 per cent gets too little exercise, and 19 per cent none at all". It also notes that the overweight and obesity problem "across the population in Switzerland is comparable to that of other European countries".

## Practising prevention

The plan focuses not on children who are already overweight or obese, but on prevention – ensuring that awareness of good nutrition and the importance of exercise become so anchored in popular perception that they engender fundamental and lasting lifestyle habits, so that the problem ceases to constitute a threat to public health.

Elisabeth Fry, press spokesperson for Health Promotion Switzerland (a foundation working on behalf of the government to initiate, coordinate and evaluate public health policies), told *Swiss News* that the main players charged with putting the plan into practice are the Federal Office of Public Health, the Federal Office for Sport, and the offices of public health in the 26 cantons and half-cantons. Bern-based Health Promotion Switzerland plays a coordinating role.

"Because of the degree of autonomy the cantons possess under our system of government, things cannot be centralised," Fry notes. "However, we're working with the cantons to initiate their own nutrition and activity plans targeting the 0-20 age group, and we also offer some financial support."

She says 19 cantons are already fully on board to implement prevention plans, and the others are expected to follow suit shortly.

These cantonal plans, says Fry, must include a policy component geared to op-

timising good nutrition and regular exercise, the framework for goals to be achieved, and specific projects aimed at improving fitness levels and nutrition. An example of such a project is building "proper roads to sports centres, well marked and well lit, so kids can get to such centres easily and safely" in cases where such do not already exist, she illustrates.

"The idea is that the infrastructure must be in place to give people every opportunity to incorporate proper nutrition and exercise into their lives."

And, projects will also include "fun learning approaches for children and consciousness-raising for teachers, parents and even parents-to-be," Fry adds.

Other requirements of the cantonal plans include linking various players from both private and public sectors into a network. Good communication is a top priority.

"Everything will be coordinated – and monitored," Fry says. Each canton is expected to deliver an annual progress report.

## Networking and building awareness

"Consciousness is slowly changing. We see it in the way parents are getting involved in the kind of food that is served to their kids at school," says Fourchette Verte Secretary General, Elena Portolès Nikles.

Fourchette Verte Suisse, active in the French-speaking part of the country and in Ticino, is a label that eateries may qualify for if they offer at least one meal on the menu that is nutritionally balanced according to specific criteria, and served in hygienic conditions on non-smoking premises.

Portolès Nikles told *Swiss News* that of the 789 restaurants and canteens that have so far qualified for the Fourchette label, 50 per cent are in schools and pre-schools, illustrating the current "strong demand" for the label "particularly from crèches" (day-care centres).

Some of the other awareness-builders in the campaign for good nutrition include the Bern-based Swiss Society for Nutrition.

A priority of the society, says

spokesperson Caroline Bernet, is to make reliable nutrition-themed information, publications and services available to the general public, schools and professionals. Their website – provided in the 'more information' sidebar with those of the other organisations discussed in the article – has a downloadable food pyramid for adults, and a nutrition disk for kids (both are available in English).

In addition to providing a free online and phone Q&A service called NUTR-INFO, they are involved in a project called 'Nutrikid', which provides materials on a healthy diet for children, parents and especially teachers.

Even supermarket chains Coop and Migros are getting in on the act.

Coop's new line, JaMaDu, is aimed at children four to nine years old. The idea is for the line's healthy food products – like apple chips – to be perceived as "innovative and cool" so that kids feel motivated to eat more fruit and vegetables, Coop spokesman Karl Weisskopf told *Swiss News*.

He added the products are devoid of artificial colourants or flavours, and additives are used only if absolutely necessary.

The chain also maintains a "healthy eating – knowing what's good for you" section on its website. It contains a wealth of nutritional information, albeit not in English.



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Migros spokesman Corsin Caviezel said that his organisation's basic goal is to promote good nutrition "to prevent children from becoming overweight in the first place".

Along with the chain's Lilibiggs food line is a club with its own website and a nutrition tree/food pyramid "that aims to get across to young children in a playful manner what healthy, balanced eating looks like", Caviezel adds.

In addition, Migros also supports 'club minu', one of the new multi-disciplinary programmes for overweight children that is reimbursed by basic mandatory Swiss health insurance – read further for more details.

**Clean-up time**

Jannick Grin, a member of the Swiss Association of Registered Dietitians, has her own practice in Pully, near Lausanne, and is a nutritional columnist for the Sunday edition of the Swiss-French newspaper *Le Matin*.

During a telephone interview with *Swiss News*, Grin highlighted the fact that the new approach to eating well and maintaining a healthy weight is not through dieting. In fact, dieting has become something of a dirty word for all those beating the nutrition-and-exercise drum.

She believes parents have to clean up their acts, and opt for the new nutrition and exercise approach themselves rather than thinking along diet lines.

"They need to set the example to their children. Many parents don't realise that they have a role in terms of nutrition; that it's up to them to say 'Our bodies are not garbage cans!'"

In Grin's estimation, "we are about 10 years behind" in proper awareness levels with regard to the issue. However, she's sure that popular perceptions can change.

"When the anti-smoking campaigns began, nobody believed we would see the day when cigarette packs have to carry death warnings on them, and smoking is progressively being banned from public places," she says. "But it's what happened, so we'll get there with this too."

But she has a different take on the approach to food. A firm believer in teaching children to "listen to their bodies", she also believes that children should be brought closer to healthy food by learning to cook and by actively developing their sense of taste, with the theory that when it is well-developed the appeal of junk food falls away by itself.

This "humanist vision to nutrition" is also promulgated by the Valais-based organisation, Senso5. Grin praises *Semaine du Goût* (Taste Week), which has become a big September event in the Swiss-



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French part of the country, for its commitment to slow food.

**When children are already fat**

Geneva University Hospital's Dr. Farpour-Lambert has been a torchbearer in the campaign for prevention, and also in

changing perceptions about how to deal with overweight and obese children.

She is involved in cantonal, national and international policy consultations, is a member of the London-based European Childhood Obesity Task Force and a driving force behind the Sportsmile Foundation, which offers sports options for obese and chronically ill children.

Like Grin, she stresses how much there is to do. She is particularly concerned by the number of health professionals who are behind in their approach to overweight and obese children.

"All too often, strict diets are still being recommended, and there is no advice to patients about exercise or lifestyle change, and no implication of the whole family in the process."

While appetite suppressants like Rimonabant are now off the market, and

surgery, e.g. gastric bypass or gastric banding, is not an option for children under 18 (and then only as a last resort, if the obesity is the source of nefarious complications), "the need to improve training, and change thinking in the medical profession is urgent", she says.

**Insurance reimbursement**

But the new multi-disciplinary programmes certified by the Swiss Society of Paediatrics and the AKJ, a professional association specifically devoted to fighting obesity in children and teens, and reimbursed by the Swiss basic mandatory health insurance if stringent requirements are met, leave many like Grin and Farpour-Lambert dissatisfied.

While these programmes focus on the same nutrition-and-exercise formula recommended for prevention, all are non-

residential group programmes that last a minimum of six months, and include mandatory monitoring for 24 months thereafter. Only truly motivated children and teens with parents who commit to active participation in the re-education process can land a spot in such a programme.

"Across Switzerland, there are 60,000 children in need of treatment. There are presently only 500 places in multi-disciplinary programmes, and all we can hope for within the next few years is to double that figure," says Farpour-Lambert.

A certified programme of this type, driven in large part by Farpour-Lambert, is already in place at Geneva's University Hospital.

Like his colleague in Geneva, Dr. Christophe Rutishauser of Zurich's Kinderspital expresses concern over the insurance companies' stance.

As head doctor for adolescent medicine and consultant for eating disorders, he bemoans the limitations that the stance puts on running other types of reimbursed programmes. He excludes, however, the idea of creating programmes for the children of those who can afford them out of pocket. "Programmes need to be accessible to all and not just a privileged few," he says.

Rutishauser told *Swiss News* that there are three programmes in Zurich – at his hospital, Triemlispital and the Migros 'club minu' – and they have agreed to stagger their start dates across the calendar year, and refer applicants to the programme with the next starting date regardless of where it will be held.

Speaking the local language is necessary – for both child and parents – for taking part in such a programme, adds Rutishauser.

**Santé Suisse**

*Swiss News* asked Felix Schneuwly, head of policy and communication at Santé Suisse, the professional association of Swiss health insurance companies, about the new programmes, which were approved for reimbursement as of 2008 under the basic mandatory health insurance policy, at a cost of SFr 4,200 per child.

"Before introducing this new multi-disciplinary group programme on a trial basis for five years, we did have coverage of individual treatment on the basic insurance and the rate of failure – the patients inevitably gained [back] weight lost – was very high," he says.

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Migros' Lilibiggs bag of red apples is designed to appeal to children

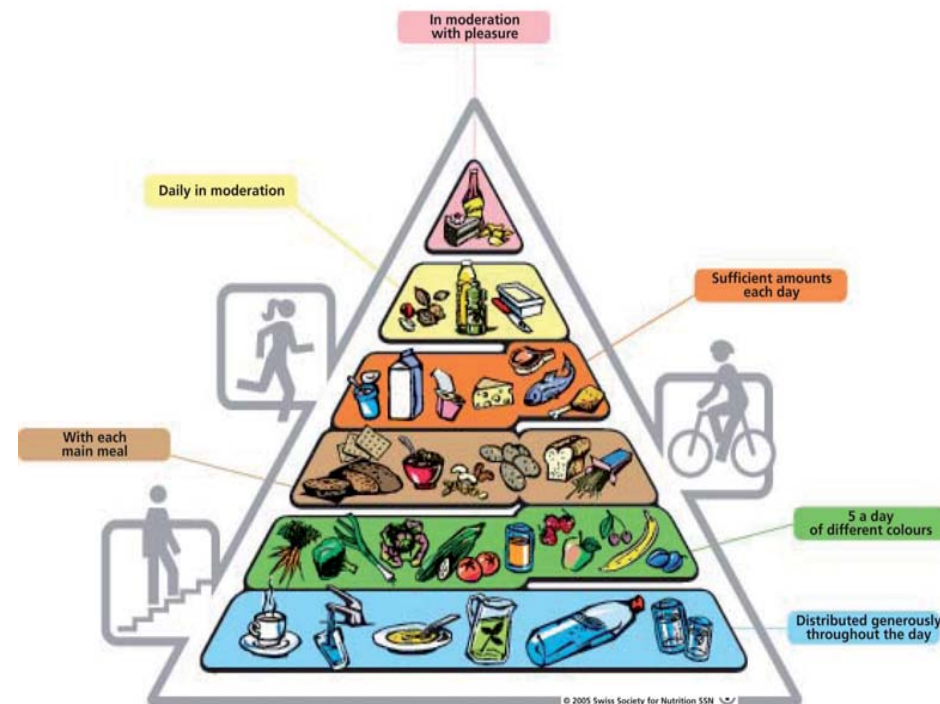
**For more information and support:**

- Health Promotion Switzerland: [www.promotionsante.ch](http://www.promotionsante.ch)
- Federal Office of Public Health: [www.bag.admin.ch](http://www.bag.admin.ch)
- Federal Office for Sport: [www.baspo.admin.ch](http://www.baspo.admin.ch)
- Fourchette Verte Suisse: [www.fourchetteverte.ch](http://www.fourchetteverte.ch)
- Swiss Society for Nutrition: [www.sge-ssn.ch](http://www.sge-ssn.ch)
- Nutrikid: [www.nutrikid.ch](http://www.nutrikid.ch)
- Coop: [www.coop.ch](http://www.coop.ch)
- Coop's JaMaDu: [www.games.jamadu.ch](http://www.games.jamadu.ch)
- Migros' Lilibiggs: [www.lilibiggs.ch](http://www.lilibiggs.ch)
- Migros' club minu: [www.minuweb.ch](http://www.minuweb.ch)
- Swiss Association of Registered Dietitians: [www.svde-asdd.ch](http://www.svde-asdd.ch)
- Senso5: [www.senso5.ch](http://www.senso5.ch)
- Semaine du Goût: [www.gout.ch](http://www.gout.ch)
- European Childhood Obesity Task Force: [www.easo.org](http://www.easo.org)
- Sportsmile Foundation: [www.sportsmile.ch](http://www.sportsmile.ch)
- Swiss Society of Paediatrics: [www.swiss-paediatrics.org](http://www.swiss-paediatrics.org)
- AKJ: [www.akj-ch.ch](http://www.akj-ch.ch)
- Geneva University Hospital's Obesity Care Program (HUG): [www.contrepoids.hug-ge.ch](http://www.contrepoids.hug-ge.ch)
- Zurich's Kinderspital: [www.kispi.uzh.ch](http://www.kispi.uzh.ch)
- Santé Suisse: [www.santesuisse.ch](http://www.santesuisse.ch)
- Dr. Daniel Dufour: [www.vitamed.ch](http://www.vitamed.ch)

For additional information about the players involved in getting children and teens in Switzerland to eat better and move more, consult the links list at: [www.suissebalance.ch](http://www.suissebalance.ch).

Nationwide weight loss and nutrition programmes that are reimbursed: [www.akj-ch.ch](http://www.akj-ch.ch); click on your area of the map, and the programmes in your area will come up.

## NEWS FEATURE



Adult food pyramid from the Swiss Society for Nutrition

From the insurers' point of view, the new programmes are geared towards making headway with the problem, instead of simply continuing to support yo-yo diets often responsible for endless costs, and the likelihood of additional and future costs overweight and obese people eventually present.

"Depending on an individual insurance company's terms for its supplementary insurance packages, other types of treatment and approaches may be covered, just not on the basic mandatory policy," he added.



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**Psychological roots**

Of the 20 per cent of children in Switzerland who are overweight – and the five-to-eight per cent who are obese – psychological reasons are at the heart of the surplus poundage in 35 per cent of cases, according to Santé Suisse.

It's not just too much junk food and TV-watching that can bring on obesity.

"Stress and anxiety can also be triggering causes, and possibly deeper-seated causes that the child is compensating for by overeating," says Farpour-Lambert.

These blog excerpts from an 18-year-old obese boy illustrate that point (<http://monpoidsetmoi.blog.tdg.ch>): "I felt abandoned after somebody I loved very much went out of my life. That's how it started ... I liked that 'everything's okay' feeling you get right after you finish off a pack of cookies, or a chocolate bar ... I continued eating in secret because it made me feel better ..."

Dr. Daniel Dufour, a Geneva-based MD who has incorporated the holistic perspective of Chinese and other traditional medicines into his patient approach, questions the statistic indicating only 35 per cent of overweight or obese children have deep-seated emotional issues. "To my mind, it's far higher than that," he says.

**More than diet and exercise**

He also questions the nutrition and exercise formula approach to treating weight and obesity problems in cases where food is used to fill an emotional void.

"The whole campaign places too little focus on the key role emotions play in all of us," Dufour says.

"It's easier to talk about fruit and vegetables than it is to venture into the quicksand of fear, guilt, and unexpressed sadness and anger that may lie within us."

While strongly in favour of good nutrition and exercise, "per se they have as little effect on the crux of the issue as dieting," he says.

"Like all addictions, eating disorders are a way for a much more profound distress to manifest. They are a way of trying to relieve the tension which that distress creates in our body."

In fact, he believes the new campaign may actually do more harm than good for overweight and obese children in that "it may reinforce the child's negative self-image, making him or her feel inadequate and guilty not only for being fat, but for having these cravings and not being able to get them under control."

Dufour strongly believes that these "children need to be helped to identify the source of tension in themselves – and it's a lot easier for children than with adults, there's a lot less resistance."

Then, he says, children can be taught exercises to recognise when the tension appears and to "turn off the 'monkey mind' that is thinking about relieving it with food, and to turn instead to sports, or some activity that is very physical and tactile like art, crafts, dancing, so that child becomes totally focussed in the present moment."

But it only works, he adds, if a child also learns to acknowledge underlying triggering emotions – "to live them out in appropriate ways that do not hurt others" – instead of stuffing them down with food.

**Summary**

Discussion and debate on effective ways to deal with the problem of overweight and obese children and teens in Switzerland show no signs of abating soon.

Just how effective will the multi-disciplinary programmes and the government prevention plan turn out to be?

Let's see where things stand in 2012.