Adolescence is a crucial period in life and implies multiple physiological and psychological changes that affect nutritional needs and habits. Healthy (or unhealthy) life-long habits begin there. Many non-communicable diseases, like obesity, are thought to have their origins in this period of life. The number of EU schoolchildren who are overweight or obese is rising by about 400,000 per year. The concern is not only that young people are overweight or obese, but that obesity heightens the risk for many serious illnesses including diabetes, heart disease, hypertension or respiratory disease. However, the relationship between these diseases and the adolescent lifestyle and attitudes, physiology, genetics and environmental factors is complex and not well understood.

The key to health promotion and disease prevention in the 21st century is to establish an environment that supports positive health behavior and healthy lifestyle. In order to do that, we have to first answer the following questions: Do European adolescents have healthy eating habits? Are they sufficiently physically active? Have they healthy lifestyles? This is within the purpose of the HELENA project (Healthy Lifestyle in Europe by Nutrition in Adolescence), a wide-ranging study financially supported by the European Union.

HELENA study is designed to understand and effectively enhance nutritional and lifestyle habits of adolescents in Europe. One of the strengths and innovative aspects of the project is the use of common methodology that will result in reliable and comparable data between the countries. The project involves 25 partners from academia and industry areas in 10 countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom).

During the 3 years of the HELENA study, three main objectives will be attained. In the first place, the nutritional status of European adolescents between 13 and 16 years-old will be assessed through surveys, cross-country and cross-sectional studies in the different countries. The following aspects will be included:

- Dietary intake, nutrition knowledge and eating attitudes
- Food choices and preferences
- Body composition
- Plasma lipids and metabolic profile
- Vitamin status
- Immune function related to nutritional status
- Physical activity and fitness
- Genotype (to analyse gene-nutrient and gene-environment interactions)

This will provide insight on adolescents’ knowledge and attitudes towards nutrition and physical activity, as well as identify the main determinants of their food choice and preference. Secondly, a Lifestyle Education Programme aiming at improving eating and lifestyle habits of this population segment will be developed and tested. And finally, in collaboration with the industry partners of the project, and based on the knowledge gathered on adolescents food choice and preferences, healthy foods that are appealing to adolescents will be developed.

Several ESN members are involved in two of the work packages, which involve sensory and consumer testing:
- WP11 “Food Choice and Preferences”, and
- WP12 “Development of health promoting food products and assessment of their acceptability among adolescents”.

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- WP11 “Food Choice and Preferences”, and
- WP12 “Development of health promoting food products and assessment of their acceptability among adolescents”.
WP11 - Food Choice and Preferences (CCFRA is work package leader)

HELENA will provide data about attitudes towards nutrition, and the main determinants of the food choice and preference, among male and female European adolescents.

Objectives

- Determine issues relating to food choice among adolescents and to identify how these may affect their behaviour towards food.
- Investigate attitudes towards nutrition among adolescents and to establish the main determinants of their food choice and preference.
- To highlight similarities and differences in attitudes and behaviours between and within countries.

Approach

1. Focus Groups with 300 adolescents in 5 countries (Spain, UK, Sweden, Belgium, Hungary)
   Partners involved: AINIA, CCFRA, SIK, MEURICE R&D, CCFRA-HUNGARY.
2. Quantitative Surveys with 3000 adolescents in 11 countries (Spain, France, Germany, Hungary, Crete, Italy, Belgium, Austria, Greece, Sweden, UK)
   Partners involved: UNIZAR, UL2, FKE, PTE, UOC, INRAN, BE-TUG, AKH-WIEN, HUA, KI, CCFRA

WP12 - Development of health promoting food products and assessment of their acceptability among adolescents (SIK is work package leader)

Objectives

To develop three food products with

- Positive health effects for adolescents
- Sensory characteristics that are attractive to adolescents

Approach

1. Founding the scientific and the technological basis for the product development
   - ‘Voice of the experts’ (interviews with nutrition and health experts)
   - ‘Voice of the consumers’ (from focus groups in WP11)
   - Discussions with ingredient suppliers
2. Product development for 3 product types
3. Acceptability studies in 5 countries (Spain, UK, Sweden, Belgium, Hungary)

Partners involved: AINIA, CCFRA, SIK, MEURICE R&D, CCFRA-HUNGARY, PASA, SERRANO, CEDERROTH, CEREALIA

For more information about the HELENA project, please consult http://www.helenastudy.com, or contact Ms. Chantal Gilbert (c.gilbert@campden.co.uk) or Ms. Annika Åström (ana@sik.se)

HELENA study takes place with the financial support of the European Community (FP6-2003-Food-2-A, FOOD-2003-T2-4, Contract FOOD-CT-2005-007034)

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The HELENA consortium consists of the following 25 partners:

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<th>Participant No.</th>
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<th>Participant short name</th>
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* The project co-ordinator is Professor Luis Moreno from the Universidad de Zaragoza in Spain (email: lmoreno@unizar.es)