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## **Summary**

# **Eating and physical activity in the migrant population of Switzerland**

## **Secondary data analysis in the context of the National Programme Migration and Public Health**

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## Summary

### **Migration and Health – Eating and physical activity in the migrant population of Switzerland**

Nutrition habits and physical activity are important elements of a healthy lifestyle. As it can be shown that a large part of the Swiss population does not eat a balanced diet and does not exercise sufficiently, both nutrition and physical activity are important fields of action for health promotion and illness prevention.

The migrant population of Switzerland is often assumed to be a particularly relevant target group for such interventions as its eating habits and physical activities appear to fall short in several respects. This assumption is often based on general comparisons of native and foreign population segments or on studies examining particularly vulnerable groups of the migrant population. The present study takes up both these perspectives by performing a secondary analysis of existing data sources and trying to find as differentiated an answer as possible to the question of how the migrant population eats and exercises.

The study is based on two data sources: the second edition of the “Health monitoring of the migrant population” (GMM II from 2010) by the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and the Federal Office for Migration and the 2007 “Swiss Health Survey” (SHS 07) by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO). In the framework of the HMM II, selected samples of the migrant population were interviewed on their health and health-related behaviour using a comparatively short questionnaire in their native language. In contrast, the SHS 07 questionnaire included more questions on nutrition and physical activity and was aimed at the general population (including native Swiss persons) that was interviewed in the three major languages of Switzerland, namely German, French and Italian. Thus, the samples of both studies cover different parts of the (migrant) population and complement one another.

When examining the influence of migration background on food habits and physical activity, various issues need to be addressed. First of all, the general term “migration background” covers a number of distinct dimensions that may affect nutritional and exercise behaviour in different ways. For example, it is plausible to assume that there are “cultural preferences” for specific foods and physical activities that are associated with the region of origin. However, these preferences may diminish the longer a person resides in Switzerland. As a consequence, one would have to look at a person’s region of origin and citizenship as well as at her or his duration of stay in Switzerland to measure the impact of “migration background” on nutritional and exercise behaviour.

Against this background, different variables referring to different dimensions of a person’s migration background are used in the present study: Apart from the region of origin an extended classification of migration background was constructed, distinguishing between native Swiss nationals, naturalised Swiss persons and foreign citizens. In addition, the latter two groups were also differentiated according to region of origin. Further variables refer to the duration of stay, the type of residence permit and the reason why a person decided to migrate to Switzerland (see chapter 3).

Confining the analysis to “migration background” would be too simple, though, as there is a number of further variables influencing food habits and physical activity. Apart from migration background, one’s physical and cultural resources also matter (see chapter 2). In the empirical analysis we are thus first going to test the relationship between migration background and diet and physical activity habits before including a number of further variables referring to social background and living standard.

The results of these analyses are documented and discussed in chapters 4 and 5 and the appendix. The following paragraphs include a short summary of important findings:

- At a general level it can be noted that differences in food habits and physical activity vary according to the migration variables used. The type of permit and the reason for migrating to Switzerland do not appear to play a substantial role, whereas there are some significant differences

with respect to citizenship and duration of stay. However, the most important differences in eating food habits and physical activity habits emerge when distinguishing between native and naturalised Swiss persons as well as foreigners according to their region of origin.

- All groups examined in the GMM II and the SHS 07, i.e. also the native Swiss population, are characterised by shortcomings in their nutritional habits and physical activity behaviour:
  - Only a quarter (24%) of all GMM II respondents and just under a third (29%) of the SHS 07 respondents conform to the *nutrition recommendation* of eating at least five portions of vegetables and fruit per day. In the GMM II naturalised persons from Turkey have the highest proportion of persons conforming to the recommendation (35%), in the SHS 07 naturalised persons from Northern and Western Europe eat most vegetables and fruits (34%). These percentages drop as low as 17 per cent in the GMM II (asylum seekers from Sri Lanka) and 18 per cent in the SHS 07 (foreign nationals from South Eastern and Eastern Europe). The share of persons conforming to the recommendation in the native Swiss population of the SHS 07 is 30 per cent and thus approximately corresponds to the average value of all SHS 07 respondents.
  - Similar findings emerge from the analysis of *physical activity*: Two fifths of all SHS 07 respondents (41%) and a third of all GMM II respondents (32%) can be classified as “physically active” during their free time according to current recommendations.<sup>1</sup> The share of active persons varies from 26 (persons from Portugal) to 49 per cent (asylum seekers from Sri Lanka) in the HMM II, and from 29 (foreign citizens from outside of Europe) to 43 per cent (native Swiss persons and naturalised persons from South Eastern and Eastern Europe) in the SHS 07.

With respect to physical activities at work, 43 per cent of all GMM II respondents but only 29 per cent of all SHS 07 respondents claim to “work up a sweat” on three or more days per week. These shares vary between 28 (naturalised persons) to 54 per cent (persons from Portugal) in the GMM II, and from 24 (foreign residents from Northern and Western Europe) to 37 per cent (foreign residents from South Western Europe) in the SHS 07.

- Similar findings emerge from the analysis of further components of nutrition and exercise behaviour in the SHS 07. For example, 79 per cent of all naturalised persons from Northern and Western Europe claim to “pay attention to their diet” (average value: 71%; lowest value: foreign nationals from outside of Europe, 56%), and 54 per cent of this same group participate in sport for two or more hours per week (average value: 48%; lowest value: foreign nationals from South Eastern and Eastern Europe, 27%).
- Even though the differences between the various groups are small in some instances, a distinct pattern emerges from the analyses: Overall, native Swiss citizens as well as naturalised and foreign persons from Northern and Western Europa have a balanced diet and exercise more than other groups. The latter groups differ according to whether a person has been naturalised or not with naturalised groups’ values usually lying between the values of foreign nationals and native Swiss citizens.

With respect to foreign nationals it is also notable that the shortcomings in nutrition and exercise habits are usually larger in the GMM II than in the SHS 07. These findings suggest that the nutritional and exercise behaviour of migrants becomes more similar to that of Swiss citizens the longer one has stayed in Switzerland and the more integrated she or he is. With regard to region of

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<sup>1</sup> The current physical activity recommendations of the Federal Offices for Sport and Health, Health Promotion Switzerland and the Swiss HEPA network (2009) suggest at least 30 minutes of moderately intensive physical activity per day. Persons who conform to this recommendation have been classified as „active“. Persons classified as „partially active“ are not „inactive“ but do not reach the minimal extent suggested by the recommendation.

origin the findings are less clear: Depending on the dimension of eating and exercise habits examined, different groups of foreign nationals exhibit the largest shortcomings.

- Differences become more marked if further social background variables are taken into account. Independent of migration background, higher educational levels, household incomes and occupational status are associated positively with a balanced diet and higher physical activity levels. In addition, women usually eat a more balanced diet but are less physically active. In this connection, one result regarding food habits from the SHS 07 is striking: Even the group of women that conforms least to the recommendation “5 per day” (foreign citizens from South Eastern and Eastern Europe: 25%) is still more in line with the recommendation than the group of men who eat most vegetables and fruit (foreign and naturalised persons from Northern and Western Europe: 24%).
- With regard to the prevalence of *overweight* (see chapter 5) we also find substantial differences between groups and data sets. Overall, the share of overweight persons in the HMM II study is markedly higher (50%) than in the SHS 07 (37%). If migration and social background as well as food and exercise habits are integrated simultaneously into a multivariate statistical model, the effects of background variables are stronger than those of the behavioural dimensions. On the one hand, this result may be due to the relative simple measurement of nutritional and exercise habits in the two data sets used. On the other hand, the result also suggests that further dimensions of one’s living conditions and lifestyle though not examined here play a role when explaining differences in health outcomes.

To sum up, we can thus conclude that none of the examined groups of foreign nationals, naturalised and native Swiss citizens are characterised by an entirely healthy lifestyle regarding food habits and physical activity or weight problems. Even though shortcomings can be found in the group of native Swiss persons as well as in the group of naturalised and foreign persons, these tend to be larger in parts for the foreign population and in groups characterised by low educational and income levels.

The comparative analysis of the HMM II and SHS 07 surveys does not only reveal important differences between the native Swiss and the migrant population, but also points at differences within these groups. Even though the migrant population becomes more similar to the native Swiss population with regard to their diet and physical activity linked to increasing integration (e.g. naturalisation, improved language skills), this is only partially good news because native Swiss citizens, too, are characterised by marked shortfalls in their nutritional and exercise habits. Against this background, one has to conclude that interventions aimed at improving food habits and increasing physical activity levels in the migrant population should be continued or even intensified. At the same time, however, the potential for improvement in the native Swiss population should not be neglected either.