

Summary

A balanced diet and sufficient physical activity are important characteristics of a healthy lifestyle. As a result, eating and physical activity habits are of major interest in research and politics. Against this background, Switzerland has participated in the comparative survey „Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children“ (HBSC) since 1986. In the framework of this study, the Swiss organisation "Addiction Switzerland" carries out a survey of school children aged 11 to 15 years regarding their health status, well-being, lifestyle and living conditions every four years. The present report was mainly based on data from the 2010 survey that was analysed regarding the following four general questions:

1) What are the main features of the diet and physical activity habits of 11 to 15 year old persons living in Switzerland?

Even though fruits, vegetables and unsweetened beverages are comparatively popular with Swiss pupils, a number of more "problematic" foodstuffs are also widely used. Here, sweets, chocolate and sweetened beverages are more popular than crisps, fries and hamburgers. It is also evident that the older the children grow, the more their diet becomes unbalanced. In addition, girls on average eat healthier than boys.

If the diet recommendations of the Swiss Society for Nutrition (SGE 2011) are being used as a benchmark, the following picture emerges: A majority of all children and adolescents meets the recommendations regarding unsweetened beverages and the consumption of fast food; only 21 per cent meet the recommendation concerning fruit, 15 per cent eat enough vegetables and 35 per cent are in line with the recommendation regarding sweets, sweetened beverages and salted snacks. However, only 0.2 per cent of all respondents meet all seven recommendations that can be modelled on the basis of the HBSC data. Half of all children are in line with a maximum of two of these recommendations.

Similar finding emerge regarding physical activity. Only 12 per cent of all children and adolescents meet the joint recommendation of different Swiss organisations (BASPO et al. 2010) to become physically active for at least 60 minutes per day in a way that one's heart rate and/or respiration increases. If one also takes into account sports, 29 per cent of all children and adolescents can be classified as "active", i.e. they do sports on at least four days and for at least four hours per week and/or are physically active at least 60 minutes per day. With respect to physical activity, there is a substantial gender difference with 37 per cent of all boys but only 20 per cent of all girls meeting the recommendation.

2) How are diet and physical activity habits related to children's social background, other dimensions of their lifestyle, their health status and wellbeing?

There is a number of risk factors with a negative impact on children's and adolescents' diet. The use of electronic media (on schooldays as well as on weekend) appears to be particularly important: The more time children and adolescents spent with electronic media, the fewer diet recommendations they meet. In addition – and as already mentioned above – boys are a "risk group" with respect to dietary habits whereas girls have a higher risk of not participating sufficiently in physical activities. Other risk factors for insufficient physical activity include the use of electronic media for more than six hours on weekday, living in the French speaking part of Switzerland and the self-assessment that one's body weight is too high and one's health status is not perfect.

Body weight (BMI) is only in a few instances and only moderately related to diet and physical activity habits. An important exception refers to breakfast habits: Persons eating a breakfast every day are less often overweight. In addition, overweight is statistically associated with gender (boys), an extensive use of electronic media and with having parents with no vocational training or higher schooling. As opposed to body weight with its weak correlations, there is a clear relationship between one's health status and one's physical activity and diet.

3) What changes have there been with respect to children's and adolescents' diet and physical activity habits over the past few years?

Most dimensions of physical activity, diet, lifestyle and health status have not changed substantially since the 1990s. There is some positive development regarding the consumption of fruit and vegetables in the sense that the proportion of children and adolescents claiming to eat at least once a day fruit and/or vegetables has increased slightly since 2002. Conversely, the consumption of crisps, hamburgers and hot dogs, cola and other sweetened beverages as well as energy drinks have remained relatively constant since 2002. With respect to physical activity there has only been one remarkable change: the proportion of pupils that engage in intensive physical activities (i.e. activities that make them sweat or increase their breathing substantially) on less than three days per week has decreased 8 per cent since 2002.

There are also some interesting changes with respect to the use of electronic media: Watching TV has lost some of its former significance, but at the same time electronic games and computers have gained ground. As a result, the total time spent with electronic media may well have increased since 2002. Finally, there appears to be a trend towards a higher proportion of overweight boys (up to 12 per cent from 8 per cent in 1990). This finding needs to be interpreted with caution, however, as other results from Switzerland suggest that the HBSC survey results severely underestimate the number of overweight children.

4) What can be said about Swiss children and adolescents in comparison with respondents from other European countries?

The picture emerging from a comparison of Swiss HBSC respondents with the results from Switzerland's neighbouring countries and other European nations is a mixed one. On the one hand, Swiss children and adolescents appear to do quite well with respect to the share of overweight persons, the use of electronic media and the consumption of fruit and vegetables. On the other hand, there are important shortcomings with respect to having breakfast, the consumption of sweetened beverages. Regarding their physical activity, the evidence for the Swiss respondents is mixed, but overall they only appear to lie in the middle ground of all countries examined.

Independent of whether Swiss children and adolescents do better or worse in comparison with young persons from other countries, our results show a number of important shortcomings and a correspondent need for preventive action. In other words, the HBSC 2010 survey clearly demonstrates that preventive and health promotion interventions still have substantial potential when it comes to enhancing health behaviour of young people.