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Health Healthy for the Wealthy

22.02.2008

By Vanja Kovačič

Increasing inflation and its effects on the prices of food in

Slovenia could take health problems in the country to alarming heights. Those most at risk are low-income families, pensioners, and the young.

In response to the growing prices of food in Slovenia, representatives of Cindi Slovenia—a World Health Organisation (WHO) agency operating in Slovenia whose main aim is the elimination and prevention of chronic diseases and the promotion of healthy living—voiced their concern over the effect this could have on the dietary habits and, consequently, the health of the population. Even before the January, and pending February/March, price increases an assortment of healthy foods for an average four-member family cost EUR 600, which represents 73% of the average net wage in Slovenia. More specifically, to meet the nutritional need for the intake of fruit, a person would need to spend EUR 1.50 a day.

Studies conducted by Cindi Slovenia show that, as a result of the increasing prices of food, the dietary habits of low-income families, pensioners and the young between the ages of 25 and 35 are deteriorating. These groups already most frequently exhibit chronic and other health disorders, which are directly linked to poor dietary habits, and, with the further increases in food prices, the situation will undoubtedly worsen.

Dietary habits of Slovenes

In addition to the fact that the diet of an average person does not contain a healthy portion of carbohydrates or fibres, Slovenes, eat food that is too high in fat. Furthermore, the daily intake of fruit is well below the recommended daily dosage. The study conducted in 1996 by Verena Koch, which remains the most comprehensive study of nutritional habits of Slovenes, showed that almost half of the population of Slovenia has never bought low-fat milk or cheese, or white meat. The study further showed that the most health conscious segment of the population are the young below 25 years old, and the older, more educated, urban part of the population between the ages of 46 to 65. On the whole, women are more concerned about having a healthy diet than men, while, despite the almost common knowledge of the health risk associated with a diet high in salt, fat, and sugar, almost half of the participants of the study admitted that they never lower the amount of any of these when cooking.

These poor dietary habits have led to 15% of the population being overweight, with 12% of these among children and young adults. The risks of being overweight, defined as having the body mass index (BMI) higher than 25, include heart disease, a higher incidence of stroke, and is associated with a greater threat of developing certain kinds of cancer. Thus, colon cancer is twice as common in overweight people, while the risk for overweight women to develop breast or cervical cancer is also greater if their BMI exceeds 21.

Inflation in Slovenia still on the rise

The inflation since adopting the Euro in Slovenia is quite alarming, especially in comparison with the rest of the EU, or, more precisely, the other member states, which have already adopted the single currency. According to Eurostat, the 2007 inflation in Slovenia was, at 5.7%, the highest of all the 15 EU member states with the Euro. In the whole of the EU in 2007, inflation was lowest in Holland (1.6%), Finland (1.9%) and the UK (2.1%), while the highest inflation was recorded in Latvia, with 14%, Bulgaria, with 11.6%, and Estonia with 9.7%. In general, the inflation for the entire EU rose from 2.2 to 3.2% in comparison to the year 2006.

In February and March, there will be further increases in prices of certain foods. Thus, the price of pasta will increase by 30%, oil by 26%, rice by 13% and sweets by 10-22%. The prices of meat and certain kinds of cheese will increase by 15 and 32%, respectively. These increases were proposed by wholesalers, and could lead to even poorer nutritional habits of the

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population, especially the low-income segment and the young, who will continue to opt for cheaper, less healthy foods.

What we should be eating

The most widely held model of a healthy diet remains the Food Pyramid, which proposes that a healthy diet must include 40% carbohydrates, preferably in the form of whole-wheat bread, pasta, rice and oatmeal, and 35% of fruits and vegetables, of which 300 to 400 grams a day must be fresh. Furthermore, the daily intake of dairy products and meat combined is not to exceed 20%, or 100 grams of meat per day. Food rich in fats or sugar is not to exceed 5% of the daily intake.

Thus, to enjoy a healthy diet, one should partake in a diet rich in complex carbohydrates, fresh fruit and vegetables. Fish, poultry, eggs and sweets should be enjoyed only a couple of times a weeks, while red meat should not be on the menu no more often than a few times a month.

Ideally, a person should eat four to five times a day, with breakfast being the most important meal of the day, and should account for 30% of the daily intake of calories. The February/March increases in prices will greatly affect the two most recommended food groups, i.e. carbohydrates and dairy products and thus pose a direct threat to the health of a large part of the Slovene population.

Alleviating the problem

The solution that Cindi Slovenia proposes is the adoption of a national nutritional policy, whose main objective would be the provision of so-called safe foods, which include fresh vegetables and fruit, whole-wheat bread, and other food low in saturated fat: The implementation of a programme aimed at promoting healthy nutritional habits and the provision of quality foods. One concrete proposal to ensure that even the low income members of the Slovene society would engage in healthy eating would be to follow the Danish model of food taxation: that the unhealthy foods, such as those high in processed sugar and saturated fats, are taxed higher than the more healthy alternatives.

To combat the problems caused by the rising prices of food, the Slovenian Ministry of Health has prepared an action plan for the year 2008, which includes a strategy to improve the dietary habits of socio-economically endangered groups of the Slovenian society. Specifically, the ministry will publish a set of guidelines to denote quality food, which will aid kindergartens and schools when ordering meals, while they will also use the media to inform the public about the contents and benefits of a healthy, balanced diet.

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