



To the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport

Subject : Advisory letter *Nutrition of infants and toddlers*
Your reference : VGP/VV 2655385
Our reference : U-1426, Publication no. 2006/20E
Enclosure(s) : -
Date : December 4, 2006

Dear Minister,

As you are aware, the Netherlands Nutrition Centre is currently responsible for drawing up recommendations on the nutrition of infants and toddlers. On 30 January 2010, you requested the Health Council of the Netherlands to assess the scientific merits of the draft bulletin in which those recommendations would be included and elucidated. The Council received the draft bulletin for review at the end of August. I requested Professor H.A. Büller, Professor P.J.J. Sauer and Professor G.J. Schaafsma - all members of the Health Council - for their comments on the draft text and for any further suggestions they might have. This advisory memorandum presents the essence of their comments and some further points for consideration I have added. The Netherlands Nutrition Centre has been informed separately of any detailed, substantive or editorial comments and these are not discussed in this letter.

The scientific substantiation of the recommendations could be better and clearer

The bulletin's authors write in the introduction that their aim was to base their recommendations (they speak of 'starting points') as far as possible on scientific insights. At the same time, they refer to the aim of the recommendations: to enable professionals involved in the nutrition of healthy neonates, infants and toddlers to provide scientifically substantiated information and to develop further policy initiatives in this area. As indicated by the authors, the recommendations are formulated in a manner that also takes into account their utility and feasibility.

These practical aspects of the subject understandably receive a great deal of attention. It is, after all, part of the Nutrition Centre's task to provide information. However, it should be clear where scientific findings end and practical considerations begin. Unfortunately, the draft bulletin's text



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displays shortcomings on this point. It is true that each of the bulletin's ten paragraphs ends with a list of scientific references, but it is impossible to determine which publications relate to which recommendations. More important, the authors actually state that, for the sake of clarity, they opted not to include references in the text. However, a clearer analysis of this kind is essential for forming a sound opinion of the scientific substantiation of the various recommendations. Moreover, the required account of the procedures adopted in the selection and assessment of relevant research results is absent. This all detracts from the scientific certainty with which some assertions are made. A few examples are provided below.

What could be improved? In my opinion, the answer to this question is connected with the way in which the provision of nutritional information for adults is organised. The Health Council is making the first move in this area with an assessment of the results of scientific research. In an advisory report to be published soon¹, the Council sets out guidelines for proper nutrition based on those scientific data. The Netherlands Nutrition Centre will then have the task of translating those guidelines into the quantities of foods to be used. Practical considerations will also play a role in the translation. In my opinion, a two-stage approach of this kind should be adopted for the nutritional advice provided for infants and toddlers. In other words, the quality of the recommendations concerned would be improved if, from now on, the Health Council first identifies the latest scientific developments in this field. In connection with this, I refer to the present work programme, which includes 'the prevention and treatment of overweight in the under-threes'.

The bulletin is too certain about the health benefits of breastfeeding

The bulletin characterises the encouragement of breastfeeding as one of the key points in the nutritional recommendations. Although it is true that the importance of breastfeeding is beyond dispute, the authors attach numerous specific benefits to this type of feeding, without providing proper substantiation for doing so. For example, they argue that breastfeeding protects against overweight in later life and that it promotes the intellectual and motor development of children.

¹ Health Council. Health Council of the Netherlands. Guidelines for a healthy diet 2006. The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2006; publication no. 2006/21E.



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However, scientific indications for the occurrence of these and various other favourable effects are scarce.

Scientific research into possible health benefits of breastfeeding is also methodologically difficult to conduct. Breastfed and bottle-fed children would have to be compared with each other. Randomisation according to the type of feeding would be impossible in such a study on ethical grounds. The mothers of breast-fed and bottle-fed children also differ among themselves. This makes it impossible to disentangle the effect of the mother, the effect of breastfeeding and the effect of the composition of the formula feed. In the light of the above, statements about the protective effect of breastfeeding require the necessary caution and qualification.

The combination of proper nutrition and sufficient physical activity leads to healthy children

In your request for an advisory report, you referred to the importance of proper coordination between nutritional guidelines for infants and toddlers, and those for adults. I mentioned earlier in this letter that the Health Council is shortly due to publish an advisory report containing recommendations for adults. In addition to nutritional guidelines, it will also emphasise that balanced dietary habits are likewise part of a healthy lifestyle. In particular, it will pay further attention to the relationship between healthy eating and sufficient physical activity.

It is striking that the bulletin's authors devote few words to the importance of sufficient physical activity at a young age. Many children are currently pushed around in buggies for long periods and often transported by car. In other words, they walk relatively little. There is every reason to underscore and explain - more clearly than in the bulletin - the importance of learning and taking pleasure in movement from an early age.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

Professor D. Kromhout
Vice President