

# Eat proteins to lose weight

by Loek Kusiak

Extremely overweight? According to DiOGenes, a European study in which Maastricht University (UM) took part, protein-rich foods like lean meat and wholegrain bread may be the solution. So is the search now over for the holy grail of weight loss? “No, but when obese people lose weight it will help them to maintain their new weight”, says Marleen van Baak, endowed professor of Physiology of Obesity and DiOGenes project leader for Maastricht.

Overweight is on the increase. At present, almost half of the Dutch population is overweight and 13% suffer from obesity (extreme overweight as a chronic disorder, which can lead to diabetes and cardiovascular disease). Heredity may play a role here: if one parent is obese, there is a reasonable chance that the child will be too. And then there are the triggers all around us.

“Look around you on the street. You can get food everywhere and at such low prices. I see people on station platforms slurping out of enormous soft drink cups. Twenty years ago you only saw that in the United States. And exercise? We’re doing less and less of it”, sighs Van Baak, who works at NUTRIM, the UM institute for nutrition research. “It’s just so unnecessary for overweight to cause so many health problems.”

The final report of the DiOGenes (Diet, Obesity and Genes) study was published in late 2010. The project had been running since 2006 at universities in eight European countries, supported by € 14.5 million in grants from the European Union. It was initiated by Wim Saris, UM professor of Human Nutrition, who quickly found himself at the reins of the largest dietary study ever conducted. The results have since appeared in renowned publications such as the *New England*

*Journal of Medicine and Pediatrics*. Sponsors and partners included food producers like Unilever and Nestlé. A total of 900 families took part, of which both parents and at least one child living at home were overweight. A hundred of these families came from the Maastricht region.

## Blood sugar levels

“The biggest problem in obesity is not losing weight, but maintaining the new, lower weight”, says Van Baak. “Can small variations in diet stop us from gaining weight again, or limit the weight that we do gain? This was the key question in the DiOGenes study. In other words, we were looking for the most effective diet to prevent overweight. What happens to your weight if you eat more protein, and what effects do different types of carbohydrates have?”

An important difference between carbohydrates is the extent to which they increase blood sugar. Van Baak: “One measure of this is the glycaemic index, or GI. The assumption was that the faster the sugars enter the bloodstream, the greater the chance of weight gain.”

In Copenhagen and Maastricht, the research teams set up ‘supermarkets’ at the universities, where the families