

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Many Canadian consumers are interested in healthy eating and nutrition, but there are real economic and environmental barriers to following the food guide, including cost, accessibility of healthy foods, and busy work schedules. Additionally, tensions exist in how people understand the relationship between food choice and health. Healthy eating can be challenging for consumers to define and difficult to achieve, as our knowledge of health and food changes over time and based on our location, culture and experiences.

Though government publications, such as the Food Guide and Canada's Dietary Guidelines, offer some guidance on healthy eating, food choices are impacted and influenced by availability and affordability of healthy food and other factors such as marketing, experience, and culture.

An interdisciplinary group of academic experts at the University of Guelph used an evidence-based lens to examine the gaps in Canadians' understanding of healthy eating and factors that may influence their ability to follow healthy eating recommendations; they provide an analysis of gaps and opportunities for regulators, policy-makers, marketers, education specialists and other stakeholders interested in improving health and nutrition in Canada.

Accessibility and Affordability of Nutritious Foods. Our environment impacts our ability to eat healthily; unhealthy, inexpensive food tends to be more readily available in lower-income neighbourhoods, and healthy foods may be available less often, of poorer quality, or consumers may need to travel long distance to access them. Environmental influences also affect our consumption in restaurants and grocery stores (large portion sizes, visible placement of unhealthy foods, child-targeted marketing), as does family income. A nutritious school food program and incentives that support retailers and restaurants to encourage healthy food choices could support healthier eating.

Nutrition Education and Knowledge. Lack of nutrition education is a key challenge to improving healthy eating behaviours. Consumers must have food literacy — that is, they must be able to (1) understand food and nutrition, (2) read labels, (3) prepare appropriate food, and (4) have confidence in their knowledge and abilities. Home economics

classes offer an excellent opportunity to improve food literacy in Canadian students; improved nutrition and menu labelling could also reduce confusion.

Social and Cultural Factors. Factors like time, nutritional value, cost and taste influence food decisions; gender, culture and social norms also play a role, and should be considered in future research and policy decisions.

Despite these challenges, we have an opportunity to create change by capitalizing on existing tools and resources. Strategies to encourage healthy eating include:

Regulatory Environment. Regulators should use mandates, restrictions, economic incentives, provision of information and environmental defaults — in combination with one another, and according to the evidence base — to encourage healthy eating. Social interventions for low-income households and financial incentives for industry are likely to have significant impacts.

Marketing for Canada's Food Guide. Marketing science should inform the communication of Canada's Food Guide to consumers to effectively impact healthy eating, and government can more effectively work with industry to implement programs that inform consumers and influence healthy behaviour.

School Boards and Ministries of Education. Schools should support healthy eating habits by providing healthy food for students (through a school lunch program), limiting access to unhealthy food and supporting food literacy through the curricula and educational initiatives.

Food Retailers. There is an opportunity for a collaborative and cross-sectoral approach from food retailers, who are interested in corporate social responsibility initiatives, to support health and nutrition. Industry can increase the availability and affordability of nutritious foods and replace unhealthy food with healthier food in prominent locations to reduce impulse purchases of unhealthy food.

Regulators, policy-makers, educators and industry all have a key role to play in delivering timely, accurate information and improving healthy eating in Canadian consumers. Income supports such as a guaranteed annual income, improvements to the childhood tax benefit, and increases in the minimum wage are an important element of improving health and nutrition for Canadian consumers.