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Making Better Food Choices: Health Canada's Vision for Canadians

Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy

In an effort to make it easier for Canadians to choose more nutritious foods and drinks, Health Canada recently revealed its new long-term healthy eating strategy. Health Canada's vision focuses on several key areas, including: (i) working to restrict commercial marketing of foods and beverages that are high in sugar, salt, and fat; (ii) updating nutrition label requirements; and (iii) partnering with food manufacturers, restaurants, and food services to reduce sodium and eliminate industrially-produced trans fats.

Another prong of Health Canada's healthy eating strategy is to increase access to nutritious foods by expanding the Nutrition North Canada Program. This program provides a retail subsidy to residents of isolated northern communities, enabling increased access to affordable perishable foods, as well as funding for educational activities to increase healthy eating knowledge. Finally, Health Canada will be revising Canada's Food Guide (the "Food Guide"), a document that has historically been a fundamental part of its promotion of healthy eating.

The Food Guide

Last updated in 2007, the Food Guide sets out a proposed healthy eating pattern for Canadians. It is used by a variety of stakeholders, including public, private, and not-for-profit groups, health and educational institutions, and the food industry to develop tailored

policies, programs, and guidelines. Many of these stakeholders consider the Food Guide authoritative and a Canadian standard in nutritional information.

Flawed Guidance?

Notwithstanding its widespread use, Health Canada has found that applying the Food Guide can be challenging. For example, certain stakeholders have trouble understanding how food is classified and serving sizes, as well as translating guidance into meals, snacks, and menus. Some wish that the Food Guide was simpler, while others want more detailed information. In addition, there are stakeholder groups who suggest updating the Food Guide to account for more recent scientific evidence, particularly concerning fats, oils, vitamin D, and sodium. Furthermore, others question the Food Guide's integrity, voicing concern that food industry representatives may have exerted influence over some of its recommendations.

As the Food Guide underpins many policies, programs, and initiatives across the country, Health Canada highlights the importance of keeping it updated, scientifically accurate, accessible, and credible. A recent review determined that although the Food Guide is mainly consistent with the latest scientific evidence, Health Canada needs to strengthen its advice and expand its reach. Since 2007, developments in technology have diversified the channels through which Canadians access information, particularly in a quick and simple way, so Health Canada hopes to explore new options to better communicate healthy eating recommendations to Canadians.

Another revision Health Canada plans to implement is departing from the current all-in-one format of the current Food Guide. Emphasizing three broad groups of Food Guide users (the general public, health professionals, and policy makers), Health Canada hopes that a combination of products will support its underlying goals of strengthening healthy eating recommendation and improved communication of such guidance. Some proposed products include a dietary guidance report and healthy eating pattern guidance documents. With the first updates for health professionals and policy makers slated for late 2017, Health Canada hopes to have released all of its new guidance by late 2018.

Next Steps

While Health Canada's first public consultation on the Food Guide ended December 8, 2016, Health Canada encourages stakeholders to keep an eye out for further consultations and opportunities to participate in discussions respecting its policies and priorities on healthy eating, and will make reports on these discussions publicly available. For example, each month Health Canada will publish online all other correspondence and meetings with stakeholders in list format [here](#). Canadians are also encouraged to contact Health Canada at healthyeating-sainealimentation@hc-sc.gc.ca to learn more about its healthy eating strategy.

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a cautionary note

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