

Guiding Canadians Towards Healthy Eating - National Nutrition Leadership

Promoting healthy and nutritious eating habits among Canadians has been a priority in Canada over many years. As knowledge of the role of nutrition in health has expanded, dietary advice to consumers has evolved. The long-standing objective of prevention of nutrient deficiencies was enhanced in the 1970s by a desire to minimize nutrition-related risk factors for the development of chronic diseases. By the early 1990s, dietary considerations that promoted good health and prevented disease had been integrated.

The process of nutrition policy development and adaptation has always involved a partnership of people inside and outside the federal government. Extensive consultations have incorporated the advice and experience of a broad cross-section of Canadians, including provincial and community perspectives, academics, food industry, health and nutrition professionals, and consumers.

This report examines Canada's approach to public health policy related to dietary guidance.

The 1980s and the Need for Consistent Guidelines

Consistent dietary messages to the public are important. During the 1980s the unified front of consistent national nutrition guidelines began to crumble. Individual medical researchers and health organizations had begun issuing their own opinions and guidelines to consumers. Public confusion resulted.

It became evident that comprehensive, coordinated nutrition policies were needed. Demand grew for a single set of dietary guidelines, to be adopted by health professionals, educators, governments and industry, which would send out a clear and consistent message to consumers.

In May 1986, representatives of government, industry, professional associations and voluntary agencies with an interest in dietary guidelines, met in Ottawa to develop a collaborative process to revise existing nutrition recommendations. Participants included the Canadian Cancer Society, the Canadian Heart Foundation, the Canadian Diabetes Association, the Canadian Dietetic Association, the Osteoporosis Society, the Hypertension Society, the Canadian Public Health Association, the Consumers' Association of Canada, the Grocery Products Manufacturers of Canada, Agriculture Canada, and Health and Welfare Canada.

The participants agreed to base new recommendations on the best possible scientific knowledge, and that the resulting advice to Canadians must be clear and consistent.

Thus, in 1987, Health and Welfare Canada undertook a review of the system for guiding Canadians on their food choices. The process took several years to complete, introduced important scientific advances and improved public consultation.

An Important Innovation...Two Advisory Committees

In a departure from past practices, the government appointed *two* advisory committees, to work in parallel, yet in partnership, with each other.

The first was the Scientific Review Committee. It reviewed the 1983 *Recommended Nutrient Intakes* and the 1977 *Nutrition Recommendations* in order to describe the dietary pattern that would provide sufficient nutrients for Canadians and at the same time reduce the risk of nutrition-related chronic disease.

The second advisory committee was the Communications and Implementation Committee. It undertook to translate the scientific findings into useable concepts and language for the Canadian public and to recommend a comprehensive implementation plan.

Over the next several years, this innovative process resulted in a number of documents, containing important new concepts. These were eventually melded into a completely modernized set of consumer guidelines for healthy eating, a revised food guide and companion documents that expanded key messages for specific target audiences.

After examining research evidence available on nutrition and public health, the Scientific Review Committee issued a report in 1990 called *Nutrition Recommendations*. The report provided balance to two nutrition goals that had competed in the past: an appropriate diet must deliver adequate essential nutrients for health, and at the same time reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases.

Thus, *Nutrition Recommendations* included both updated Recommended Nutrient Intakes and a scientific description of the characteristics of a healthy dietary pattern.

Specifically, the report recognized the role of physical activity in controlling weight, recommended adjusting the proportion of energy consumed as fat, saturated fat and carbohydrate, and urged reductions in sodium. Responding to consumer issues of the day, non-nutrient components were examined for the first

time and recommendations to moderate alcohol and caffeine consumption were included.

Meanwhile, the Communications and Implementation Committee translated these scientific findings into understandable guidelines, and outlined implementation strategies for action by governments, health organizations, the food industry, the food services sector, and the general public. Their report is entitled *Action Towards Healthy Eating* (1990).

Canada's Guidelines for Healthy Eating are key messages which translate *Nutrition Recommendations* into positive, action-oriented messages for the average consumer. The *Guidelines* state:

- Enjoy a variety of foods.
- Emphasize cereals, breads, other grain products, vegetables and fruits.
- Choose lower-fat dairy products, leaner meats and foods prepared with little or no fat.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight by enjoying regular physical activity and healthy eating.
- Limit salt, alcohol and caffeine.

Giving consumers nutrition information was not enough; Canadians also needed help to incorporate that advice into their daily lives. And, in fact, there was evidence that certain barriers to healthier eating existed among some sectors of society, particularly those with lower education and income, and families headed by single parents.

The report identified an extensive list of strategies to help Canadians adopt the new recommendations. They included encouraging the development of multi-sectoral, community-based nutrition interventions; creating supportive environments in schools, workplaces, restaurants and supermarkets; changing policies and legislation where necessary; and boosting nutrition research and surveillance. The implementation plan called on all sectors, national, provincial and local governments, the food industry, as well as non-government organizations and consumers to promote nutritious eating practices among Canadians.

Three technical groups of outside experts aided the Communications and Implementation Committee. They included the Task Group on Food Consumption, and the Task and Technical Groups on Canada's Food Guide. These groups reviewed *Canada's Food Guide*, and analysed the updated *Nutrition Recommendations* in light of Canadian eating habits, buying patterns, and food production practices.

The result of these reviews is contained in the document, *Action Towards Healthy Eating: Technical Report* (1990), which suggested that Canada develop

a "total diet approach" towards healthy eating. The minimum nutrient requirements of previous "foundation diets" were extended to include all sources of energy derived from food. Further, a total diet approach would give consumers a better idea of eating patterns associated with reducing the risk of developing chronic diseases.

All this work was captured in *Nutrition Recommendations: A Call for Action*, a 1990 summary report issued jointly by the Scientific Review Committee and the Communications and Implementation Committee. Key players, including the provinces and non-governmental agencies, such as disease-related and health professional organizations, endorsed these reports.

The 1990s and a Revised Food Guide

The Health Department undertook to revise *Canada's Food Guide* in accordance with the recommendations of its two advisory groups.

There had already been numerous revisions to the guide, first published as *Canada's Official Food Rules* in 1942 - everything from the name and stylistic presentation, to the content and science within. Over the years, this tool to encourage Canadians to adopt healthy eating patterns evolved to reflect improved understandings of nutrition, as well as changing consumer tastes, preferences and values.

The food guide, a high profile element of Canada's nutrition policy, is used by educators, health professionals, food marketers and consumers. Modern versions are flexible and describe a broad path to healthy eating with a limitless combination of foods.

Consumer research and extensive advice from stakeholders identified the need for a revised food guide that was simple, positive, clear, adaptable to individual needs, and acceptable to the public. Along with its partners in the public and private sectors, the government established criteria to meet these needs.

After considerable research and consultation, the newest version of the food guide was launched in 1992.

Entitled *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*, the new guide was presented in an accessible tear-sheet format. An explanatory document called *Using the Food Guide* accompanied it. This most recent version of the guide promotes dietary diversity, reducing total fat intake, and an active lifestyle. It also offers consumers a pattern for establishing healthy eating habits in their daily selection of foods.

Moreover, the guide introduces a number of new concepts. A range of servings from the four food groups accommodates the wide range of energy needs for different ages, body sizes, activity levels, genders and conditions such as pregnancy and nursing. The wide range of servings in grain products,

vegetables and fruits is designed to give consumers a better idea of the type of diet that would help reduce the risk of developing nutrition-related chronic diseases.

In addition, the guide introduces a category of "other" foods such as sweets, fats such as butter, and drinks like coffee, that, though part of the diets of many Canadians, would traditionally not have been mentioned in a food guide. The guide recommends moderation in the consumption of these foods and acknowledges their role, along with the wide range of servings in grains, vegetables and fruits, as a "total diet approach" to healthy eating.

In 1992, the government also released some companion materials to ensure the key messages were getting out. The series, *Food Guide Facts*, provides background information for nutrition professionals, health educators, home economists, communicators and others.

Policy Development Continues...A Work in Progress

The publication of *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* in 1992 was accompanied by the development of a number of supporting policies. Several related documents have since been put together, to expand on the nutrition concepts that were shaped through the late 1980s and early 1990s, and to investigate new issues.

In particular, the government recognized the importance of providing consumers with an environment that supports healthy eating. Whether they are shopping for groceries, or selecting from a dining menu, consumers need suitable information to make healthy choices.

Thus, in 1993, the government published a booklet of consumer tips entitled *Using Food Labels to Choose Foods for Healthy Eating*. Also, an intersectoral group developed policies for advertisers on how to promote healthy eating in a document called *Guidelines for Health Information Programs Involving the Sale of Foods* (1992 and 1995).

In a typically Canadian twist, the government also responded to challenges from groups and organizations on specific aspects of its *Nutrition Recommendations*. When the Canadian Paediatric Society, among others, queried the dietary recommendations on fat consumption in children, the Society was invited to join Health Canada in researching the issue. The result was *Nutrition Recommendations Update: Dietary Fat and Children* (1993), which adjusted the recommendation of appropriate levels of dietary fat for growing children.

Subsequently, *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating: Focus on Preschoolers*, (1995) was issued as a background paper for educators and communicators. It

interprets the food guide and recommendations on dietary fat in the context of pre-schoolers.

More recently, Health Canada has sought to position nutrition in a broader health context, which includes physical activity and a positive outlook on life. One result of this new, more comprehensive approach was the *Vitality Leaders Kit* (1994), intended to help community leaders promote healthy eating, active living and positive self- and body-image in an integrated way.

A New Era Begins...

The job of keeping Canada's nutrition policy and consumer guidelines up-to-date is unlikely ever to end. New scientific research on nutrition and health uncovers new relationships and connections between them. Tastes in foods vary in response to prevailing fashions and shifting demographics. Global trade exerts an influence.

With 60 years of history, the federal government knows that change and modernization of its nutritional advice is both necessary and desirable. But the challenge for the future, when a harmonized North American nutritional standard becomes inevitable, will be to finesse the transition without relinquishing those aspects of Canada's nutrition policy, and policy development process, that are valued as uniquely Canadian.

The cornerstones of that policy have been, and will likely continue to be, a strategic combination of *Nutrition Recommendations* and *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*. There is a vital place for continuing national leadership in researching, defining and communicating an accurate and comprehensive nutrition policy for Canada.

To be effective and credible, however, the federal government must work with partners. It must promote and adhere to a process that is grounded in meaningful consultation with external advisers, experts and stakeholders.

The process must begin with an understanding of the needs of the Canadian public, which demands a sensitivity and responsiveness to the community. The hallmark of the resulting policy is that it is scientifically sound, and gives Canadians a clear, consistent and accurate message about the role of food in health. Partners include educators, health professionals and a spectrum of governmental and non-governmental agencies who help to convey the latest nutrition messages to Canadians.

New knowledge, pressures and challenges mean that just as dietary advice is published, the cycle of revision and renewal begins again.

Indeed, the next cycle will recognize that the world has become a global village and that the science underlying nutrition recommendations knows no borders. An increasingly complex knowledge base on nutrients, food and health, global trade and international agreements requires increased efforts to work internationally. As a first step, the National Academy of Sciences has initiated a review with American and Canadian scientists with the aim of achieving a set of harmonized dietary reference intakes for both countries. This opportunity represents yet another exciting development in the evolution of guiding Canadians towards healthy eating.

July 1997