
Improving Canada's Eating Environment

A Call to Action to Buy and Sell Healthy Foods and Beverages

Consensus Recommendations of Canadian
Health and Scientific Organizations

Executive Summary



Purpose

This statement supports the advancement of the *Pan-Canadian Framework for Healthy Blood Pressure*¹ which advocates for the implementation of healthy dietary policies as part of a set of key recommendation to improve health and prevent diet-related chronic disease, including hypertension.

The development of this Call to Action was led by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Canadian Institute for Health Research (HSFC-CIHR) Chair in Hypertension Prevention and Control, with input and consultation by these members of the Canadian Hypertension Advisory Committee²:

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Please click [here](#) to view the list of health and scientific organizations that have offered their support for this statement.

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² Membership on the Hypertension Advisory Committee does not imply member organizational support or approval of this statement

Background

The premature death, disability and financial impact from chronic non communicable diseases (NCDs) threaten health systems and the stability of many national economies (1-5). Currently in Canada, more than 90% of adult Canadians have at least one risk factor for NCDs and NCDs cause 89% of deaths. Unhealthy diets (high in trans-fatty acids, free sugar and sodium) are among the leading risk factors. (6)

The impact of diet extends into the pediatric population, with an estimated 33% of children 5-17 years overweight or obese.(7) Without substantive change, today's Canadian children are predicted by some investigators to live shorter lives with more disability at younger ages than their parent's generation (8).

Improving Canadians' food diets requires changes to Canada's food environment. While important, health promotion to improve knowledge and awareness as an isolated intervention is likely to have little impact (1;9-11). The solution advocated by the United Nations and the World Health Organization focuses on a series of integrated governmental policies to improve the food environment coupled with education (10,12).

A key recommendation is for government and nongovernmental organizations to develop and implement policies to purchase and provide healthy foods (13-15). Such policies are referred to as "healthy food and beverage procurement policies" and can be applied to daycares, schools, prisons, hospitals, long term care facilities, the military, government cafeterias and restaurants, as well as the commercial sector, in worksites and in non-commercial organizations (15). The prioritization and implementation of healthy food and beverage procurement policies is particularly important in settings that serve food products to vulnerable populations at greater risk of diet-related diseases (e.g., children, Aboriginal peoples, individuals of low socio-economic status).

The implementation of food procurement policies have been associated with healthy food purchases, improved attitudes towards healthy foods and are well received by consumers (16). Results from health economic modeling studies found food procurement programs to be cost-saving both for the instituting organization (16) and for populations (17). Ensuring that consumers are educated about healthy eating and the rationale for the food procurement program, and ensuring competitive pricing for the healthier foods are believed to be critical success factors (16).

While most Canadian provinces have policies for providing healthy food and beverages to children in daycares and schools, many are voluntary either at institutional or regional organizational level and may not be effectively implemented. Further, often there are inconsistencies in definitions of what foods and beverages are healthy and not healthy in the policies (15). The Centre for Disease Control in the United States and the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative in England has produced documents to assist in the development and implementation of healthy food and beverage procurement policies (13,14). Although uptake of healthy food and beverage procurement policies is increasing, to achieve the full impact broad implementation is required (18).

Call to Action

The sponsoring Canadian health and scientific organizations call upon government and non-government organizations to broadly adopt healthy food and beverage procurement policies across the spectrum of our society.

Specifically, federal, provincial, and regional government needs to take leadership roles in prioritizing and implementing such policies assisting nongovernmental organizations to do the same.

Overarching Recommendations for governmental and nongovernmental policy

1. Implement a program to educate consumers about the health benefits of healthy eating and the rationale for the healthy food and beverage procurement policy. This will build support for the policy, demand for healthy dietary choices and acceptance of smaller portion sizes.
2. Encourage use of fresh foods (fruits, vegetables etc.) or fresh frozen foods. If not available only minimally processed foods should be substituted.
3. Take steps to ensure healthier food and beverages are affordable and, if possible, less expensive than unhealthy options.
4. Ensure that foods are well suited to the habits of the population being served (e.g., children vs. elderly, ethnicity).
5. Make gradual changes in the nutrient criteria where personal tastes require time to adapt to change (e.g., sodium).
6. Apply the policy to all food and beverage sources including vending machines.
7. Include criteria for calories and levels of sodium, added sugars, trans fatty acids, and saturated fats.
8. Serving size standards should be based on Canada's Food Guide. Reduce serving sizes to be appropriate to the needs of the population being served specifically avoiding excessive portions.
9. Ensure access to safe drinking water is available (e.g., drinking fountains).
10. Use national standards, such as the Canadian Dietary Reference Intake Values developed by the Institute of Medicine and Canada's Guide to Healthy Eating, in developing nutrient criteria.
11. Update the policy periodically to incorporate new knowledge.
12. Evaluate the program and where appropriate introduce effective incentives for implementation and effective disincentives for poor compliance.
13. Share best practices including challenges and successes.
14. Immediately and publicly operationalize this policy statement.

Canadian Public

1. Request healthy food and beverage and procurement policies from government programs, nongovernmental organizations you are associated or interact with and from employers at the worksite.
2. Advocate for healthy food and beverage and procurement policies in daycares, schools, long term care facilities and hospitals where there is a clear organizational responsibility for the health and wellbeing of students, clients, customers and employees.

Conclusion

Improving the health and well-being of Canadians and ensuring the sustainability of our health system is a responsibility for all Canadians. Supporting the broad implementation of healthy food and beverage procurement policies is one step. The sponsoring organizations call on all Canadians, but specifically those with organizational responsibility for others, to immediately begin to work on implementing healthy food and beverage procurement policies.

[View full statement here](#)

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