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Canada's Food Guide: What the government is changing to help Canadians eat better

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On Monday morning, federal Health Minister Jane Philpott [announced that Health Canada was seeking input from Canadians](#) in an effort to revise Canada's Food Guide.

Though [Canada's Food Guide](#) has been in place since 1942, it has required updates several times — the last one in 2007 — to reflect the changing lifestyles of Canadians. Gone are the days of a stay-at-home mom preparing dinners replete with steaming vegetables, meat and a full glass of milk. Instead, according to the latest information from [Statistics Canada](#), 69 per cent of households with families were dual-earners. This has had clear consequences when it comes to eating.

According to Health Canada, four out of five Canadians risk developing cancer, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and a plethora of other health issues as a result of unhealthy eating. And the cause of obesity and other chronic conditions can be linked directly to poor eating habits, which in turn can put a considerable burden on the health care system, with some estimates [close to \\$5 billion](#) annually.

The changes, Health Canada said, is part of an effort to improve the eating habits of Canadians and make the food guide more accessible and easier to understand.

Changes to Canada's Food Guide

The first results from the consultations are expected to be released in 2017. The dietary guide and policy report is specifically for health professionals. The second will be released in 2017–2018 and will be geared towards those who plan meals in environments such as hospitals and day cares.

And finally, in 2018–2019, the food guide will be amended in a way that will reflect eating habits of Canadians.

“We're looking at what are the different sorts of ways we can get information across so that it's more easily understood,” said Hassan Hutchinson, director general for Health Canada. How that will look isn't yet known, but Hutchinson said that it could employ visual aids or even be available as an app.

But Health Canada acknowledged that they can't do it alone: they'd have to introduce legislation and regulations that could be widely adopted, and that would mean consulting with provinces and territories.

And, of particular concern, is the one-size fits all approach of the guide. While the guide is meant as a jumping off point for Canadians, the foods may not be representative of all ethnicities or walks of life.

Food labelling

Along with the changes to the food guide itself, the government is aiming to change food labelling, in particular adding [front-of-packaging](#) information. This will not replace the nutrition information found on the back of products, but rather add further data that could help consumers make healthier choices.

While Health Canada has yet to decide what this labelling might include, it could highlight key nutrients such as sodium, sugars and saturated fats as is the practice in Chile. Or, as is followed in other countries, it could mark packaged foods using “scores” through a star-system or similar grading means.

Mary L’Abbé, professor and chair, at the University of Toronto’s Department of Nutritional Sciences, said that the update is long overdue.

“I think strongly that it’s something that should be undertaken ... Canada has been quite slow,” she said.

The front-of-packaging labelling should be something that is easily understood by consumers, she said. It could see the adoption of a ratings system based on calories, sugar, saturated fats and sodium levels, as used by the United Kingdom, or it could be similar to that of Australia which provides more of a cumulative big-picture approach that weighs the unhealthy nutrients against the healthy.

“This way the consumer can choose the healthier option,” she said. “And it would be easy to understand.”

Still, even with that information at the hands of Canadians, there would be the challenge of helping consumers understand which nutrients to limit and which to consume, L’Abbé said. “Is 500 mg of sodium a lot or too little?”

Marketing to children

Another important change Health Canada is undertaking is marketing to children. The bright, colourful, cartoon-like advertisements that are clearly directed at children — often used to promote cereals, sugary drinks and snacks — have long been a [concern among health professionals](#) who believe it sets the stage for unhealthy eating habits.

Health Canada is considering implementing legislation and regulations such as that adopted by [Quebec in the 1980s](#) where toy and food advertising to children under 13 years of age is banned.

The government is considering advertising targeted to children under 13 years old, particularly when it comes to unhealthy food options. While it may be straightforward in terms of regulating television and print sources, it could be more challenging when it comes to online.

However, L’Abbé said that other countries — and even in the province of Québec — rely on consumers reporting infractions and even manufacturers policing each other.

A bigger picture

David Jenkins, Canada Research Chair in Nutrition and Metabolism with the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto believes that in order to reduce childhood obesity — and even obesity as a whole — there has to be more of a big-picture approach.

“I think there are much bigger issues that we live with, like sedentary behaviour,” he said. “Kids see parents exhausted, sitting home on the couch with six-pack watching the Jays.”

L’Abbé said that, while she’s pleased to see the all the changes forthcoming, she was a bit discouraged by the timeline. When the first guidelines were introduced, it took about two years. Changes to an existing guide shouldn’t take five to ten years.

“When it comes to marketing, that’s a whole generation of children,” she said. “It’s a long time to wait.”

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