



Canada's updated food guide promotes mindful eating

In a break from its previous recommendations, the food guide also recommends that water be preferred to fruit juice. Paul Webster reports.

Eight decades after the Canadian Government began promoting a diet based on staple foods that included meat, dairy products, and fruit juices, it abruptly changed course last week by promoting consumption of plant-based foods and water while encouraging "mindful eating".

Canada latest Food Guide—the first since 2007, in a series that dates back to 1942—strongly echoes the recommendations of a report published on Jan 18 by the *Lancet*-EAT Commission, notes the *Lancet* report's corresponding author, Brent Loken.

"The new Canadian Guide so closely aligns with our recommendations that you could almost describe the Canadian guide as a qualitative translation of our health-oriented recommendations", says Loken, who is the Stockholm-based director of science translation for EAT, a Norway-based group that lobbies for global food system reforms.

While launching the new food guide at a farmer's market in Montreal, Quebec, on Jan 22, Canada's minister of health, Ginette Petitpas Taylor, explained that, in rethinking its public food advice, the Government suggests people "cook more often", and "eat meals with others", and "to take time to eat, to pay attention to feelings of hunger and fullness, and to avoid distractions such as eating in front of a screen. This is known as mindful eating."

A document released alongside the new Food Guide explained that the decision to promote plant-based foods and encourage lower intakes of processed meats and foods that contain mostly saturated fats was adopted following "a rigorous scientific process" by a group of scientists convened by Health Canada that "considered only high-quality scientific reports from respected authorities, such as the WHO, the World Cancer Research

Fund International and the US Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee".

The Government's new approach includes a clear warning that, in recent years, "Canadians have been purchasing more highly processed foods. When

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these foods are consumed on a regular basis, they can contribute to excess intake of sodium, sugars or saturated fat, which are all linked to chronic disease."

Health Canada also emphasised that "the regular intake of water to help reduce the amount of sugars people consume and help protect teeth from frequent exposure to sugar. Consuming foods or beverages with added sugars has also been linked to an increased risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes."

Public health and nutrition experts ranging from the Canadian Public Health Association to the Dieticians of Canada to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada praised the new approach. "Dairy and meat products have lost the protein wars", says Sylvain Charleboi, professor in Food Distribution and Policy at Dalhousie University in Halifax, NS. In a country that ranks as one of the world's largest meat exporters, the demotion of meat in the Canada Food Guide amounts to a watershed policy shift. "Health Canada won over Agriculture and Food Canada, probably for the first time", he says. "Nutrition-conscious minds prevailed, for better or worse."

In Ottawa, Bill Jeffery, executive director of the Centre for Health Science and Law, a group that tracks the food industry's efforts to lobby Canadian policy makers, says Health Canada's

decision to eschew advice from food industry experts led to refreshingly objective results.

And Jeffery worries that Health Canada's reliance in its new Food Guide on pictorial depictions of food portions rather than weight and volume measurement figures could offer overly vague guidance to many readers. "The new Guide seems unwisely imprecise and too fearful of industry conflict in dropping nearly all quantitative recommendations for various foods", Jeffrey warns. "Failing to specify optimum consumption levels for things like whole grains (100–150 g per day) and nuts (20 g per day), which would prevent thousands of deaths each, doesn't seem like a good way to steer Canadians to get the right amounts."

Health Canada will offer guidance on recommended food portions by weight and volume to health professionals and policy makers in a forthcoming technical document, says spokesperson Eric Morissette.

Loken and Jeffery both note that, although Canada's powerful food industry lobby groups appear not to have influenced the development of the new Food Guide, this is not the case with the ongoing development of new front-of-package food labelling rules.

According to federal records, heavyweight food industry groups such as the Canadian Beverage Association, the Canadian Meat Council, and the Canadian Snack Food Association are now pushing hard to have their views heard on the issue of front-of-package food labels, which have the potential to deliver far stronger warning messages to consumers about issues such as the risks of salt, sugar, and fat than the Food Guide does.

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