



Fine-Tuning the 'Food Guide'



In February, after three years in the making, Health Canada published the first new edition of "Canada's Food Guide" in 15 years.

The 2007 guide is beautifully designed and has its share of useful tips. But will it steer Canadians' diets in the right direction?

We have our doubts.

The guide does offer some sensible advice: choose lean meat, have vegetables and fruit more often than juice, and include at least one dark green and one orange vegetable every day, for example.

It also recommends that people eat at least two servings of fish a week, choose lower-fat yogurts and cheeses, and make at least half their grains whole.

And it tells everyone over the age of 50 to take a daily supplement with 400 IU of vitamin D.

But the guide is unlikely to motivate many people to change. Why?

Missing is any sense of urgency about health problems. For example, the guide never directly links sodium to stroke or trans fats to heart attacks. Readers would never know that cutting back on sodium could save 15,000 Canadian lives each year.

And only on the back page, in small print, can you find advice to limit soft drinks, pastries, salty snacks, ice cream, and other foods that undermine the Canadian diet (and that account for about one-quarter of the typical Canadian's calories).

Yoni Freedhoff, an Ottawa physician who specializes in obesity, chided the Food Guide for almost completely ignoring calories. With nearly two-thirds of Canadians overweight or obese, and with tens of thousands of people dying prematurely each year from diet-related diseases, not zeroing in on calories is

baffling to say the least.

What's more, the government could have tried to limit the influence of the cattle, oilseed, and other food industries, rather than putting them in a privileged position—on the Food Guide Advisory Committee—to shape the guide.

And Health Canada could have published the scientific justification for the guide's changes during the consultation period, when it could have been debated, instead of waiting until nearly two months after the guide was published.

As this month's cover story shows, a better

Food Guide would have recommended:

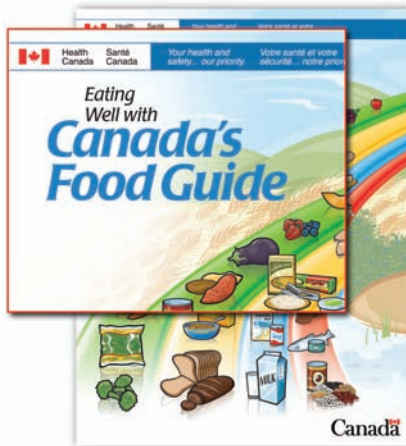
- 9 to 11 servings of vegetables and fruits a day (instead of 7 to 8 for women 50 and under and 7 for everyone over 50),
- at least one serving of beans, lentils, or tofu a day (instead of "often"), and
- the option of replacing some carbs with "good" protein or "good" fats.

Of course, no pamphlet is going to eliminate diet-related diseases (and relieve the strain on public healthcare) without protective laws and media campaigns. For example,

Health Canada should regulate artificial trans fat out of the food supply instead of relying on the Food Guide to steer Canadians away from it.

If Health Canada wants to get Canadians singing in the same nutritional key, it's going to have to do a whole lot more to tune its message, jack up its volume, and get food companies playing from the same score.

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Centre for Science in the Public Interest



Canada's new Food Guide has some sensible advice, but it doesn't do enough to steer consumers away from pop, pastries, candy, french fries, and other junk foods.

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