

Food and beverage manufacturers in Canada: Policies and commitments to improve the food environment

BIA-Obesity Canada 2019



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The project forms part of INFORMAS (International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support), a global network of public-interest organizations and researchers that seek to monitor and benchmark public and private sector actions to create healthy food environments and reduce obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) globally. We would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of the international INFORMAS research group, including Dr. Stefanie Vandevijvere and Prof. Boyd Swinburn. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the food companies who participated in the BIA-Obesity research process.

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Unhealthy diets are creating a public health crisis in Canada

Unhealthy diets are among the leading contributors to obesity and non-communicable disease development in Canada.^{1,2}

Two out of every three Canadian adults, and one in three children have overweight or obesity.³ This has a high cost to the economy, including significant impacts on the healthcare system and productivity.³ Unhealthy food environments are important contributors to poor diet quality. Actions from the government, the food industry and the broader community all contribute to the healthfulness of food environments.⁴

Food and beverage manufacturers have an important role to play in creating healthier food environments and contributing to efforts to improve population diets.

IN CANADA,
2 OUT OF EVERY 3 ADULTS
HAVE EXCESS WEIGHT
OR OBESITY²



1 IN 3 CHILDREN
HAS EXCESS WEIGHT
OR OBESITY²



Benchmarking company nutrition policies and commitments

This study assessed, for the first time, the largest Canadian packaged food and non-alcoholic beverage manufacturers on their policies and commitments related to population nutrition and obesity prevention. The main objectives were to highlight where major packaged food and beverage manufacturers in Canada are demonstrating leadership in helping to create a healthier food environment, identify good practice examples, and make specific recommendations for improvement.

Globally-developed assessment methods, tailored to the Canadian context

Company policies and commitments related to obesity prevention and nutrition were assessed using the BIA-Obesity (Business Impact Assessment – Obesity and population-level nutrition) tool developed by INFORMAS, a global network of public health researchers that is monitoring food environments in >30 countries worldwide.^{4,5} The methods were adapted from the Access to Nutrition Index (ATNI) that benchmarks food company policies at the global level.⁶

The BIA-Obesity tool assesses company policies and commitments across six key domains: corporate strategy; product formulation; nutrition labelling; promotion to children and adolescents; product accessibility; and relationships with external groups. Each domain includes a number of indicators, with assessment based on the transparency, comprehensiveness and specificity of each company's policies and commitments.

Process of assessment

The largest packaged food and beverage manufacturers in Canada (n=22) were selected for assessment. For each company, publicly available information on their policies and commitments was collected up to the end of 2017. The project team liaised with company representatives to validate and supplement publicly available information. Companies were assessed across all the domains of the BIA-Obesity tool, and scores were combined across domains and weighted to derive an overall score out of 100.

¹ Institute for Health Metrics and Disease. Country Profiles: Canada. Seattle, Washington 2017. Available at <http://www.healthdata.org/canada>.

² Statistics Canada. Measured body mass index, Canadian Community Health Survey – Nutrition, 2015.

³ Nshinmyumukiza L, et al. Temporal changes in diet quality and the associated economic burden in Canada. PLoS One 2018; 13(11): e0206877.

⁴ Swinburn et al. INFORMAS (International Network for Food and Obesity/non-communicable diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support): overview and key principles. Obes Rev. 2013;14 Suppl 1:1-12.

⁵ www.informas.org

⁶ www.accesstonutrition.org

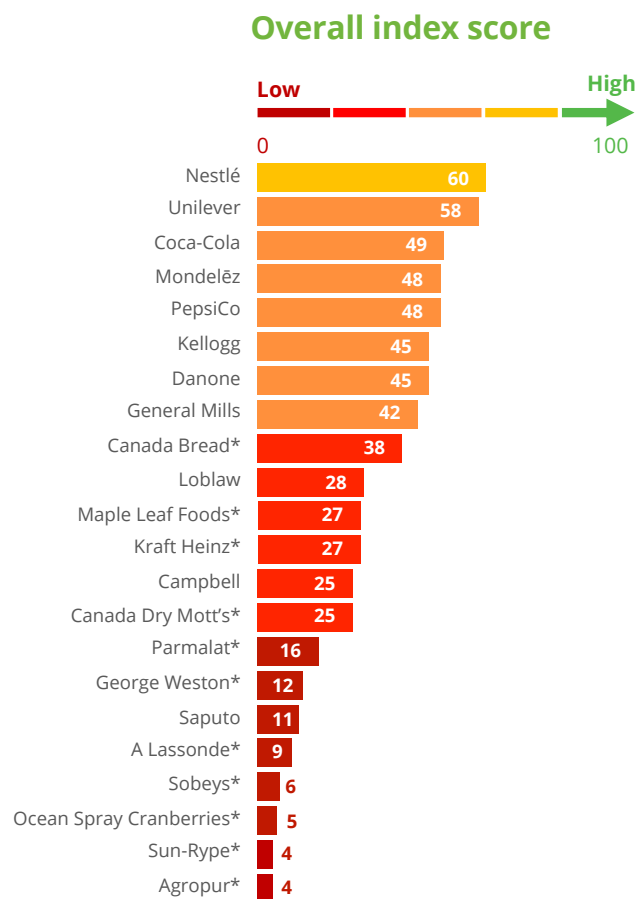
Key findings:

Overall, a number of food and beverage manufacturing companies are performing well and meeting good practice benchmarks in some policy areas, although not consistently across the industry:

- Scores for Canadian food and beverage manufacturers ranged from 4 to 60 (out of a possible 100 points), with a median score of 27.
- Half of the food and beverage manufacturing companies (11 out of 22) participated in the research process by providing data and clarification regarding company policies. On average, companies that participated in the process scored higher than those that did not. This indicates greater need for public disclosure of policy information from all companies.
- Overall, companies performed best in the **Corporate strategy** domain and poorest in the **Product accessibility** domain.

Areas where Canadian companies are showing leadership:

- **Corporate strategy:** Recognizing their responsibility and role in addressing diet-related non-communicable disease and obesity issues, and acknowledging obesity prevention and/or population nutrition and health in corporate strategies, missions and documents (18 of 22 companies).
- **Product formulation:** Action or commitments to reformulate or develop products to reduce levels of sodium in product portfolios (13 of 22 companies).
- **Promotion to children and adolescents:** Committing to some restrictions on marketing to children as part of national or international industry-led voluntary efforts (15 of 22 companies).



* Indicates companies that did not participate in the overall research process

Key recommendations

**Corporate strategy:**

- **Incorporate** commitments regarding population nutrition and health into overarching corporate strategies that clearly apply to Canada, with health and nutrition targets and objectives that reference specific goals identified by Health Canada and major international authorities. **Publicly report** progress against the targets and objectives that apply to Canada on a regular basis (e.g., annual or biannual).

**Product formulation**

- **Develop** a comprehensive commitment to reformulate company product portfolios in Canada, with SMART targets for multiple nutrients of concern (including sodium, added sugars, saturated fat, and portion size/energy content where relevant to portfolio) across all brands and product categories, in line with targets set by Health Canada. **Actively audit and publicly report** on progress in achieving these targets on a regular basis (e.g., annual or biannual).

**Nutrition labelling**

- **Commit** to implementing a simple, standardized, interpretive front-of-pack (FOP) labelling system across all products (pending the outcome of the Front of Pack regulations as part of the Healthy Eating Strategy), and **introduce** a policy to only make nutrient content claims (e.g., “99% fat free”) on products that are classified as healthier, consistent with Canada’s FOP labelling system once finalized.

**Promotion to children & adolescents**

- **Implement** a comprehensive policy that restricts the exposure and promotion of less healthy foods and brands (using validated nutrition criteria) to children and adolescents (up to age 18) across all media channels, on food packages, and at events where a large number of children or adolescents are likely to be exposed (pending the outcome of Bill S-228: The Child Health Protection Act). **Eliminate** use of promotion techniques that appeal to children and adolescents (including company-owned licensed characters) for less healthy products and brands.

**Product accessibility**

- **Develop** strategic approaches to increase the accessibility and affordability of healthier products, that include commitments to work with schools to limit the supply of less healthy products in schools and to provide equivalent healthier options wherever less healthy products are sold. **Provide public support** for government policies or legislation concerning fiscal policies that are tied to nutrients of concern (such as sugary drink taxes).

**Relationships with external organizations**

- **Improve** transparency of relationships with external groups related to nutrition and health, through public disclosure of funding (philanthropy, research, events) and support for third-party groups, presented in a consolidated and accessible format. **Commit** to not make political donations, or disclose all political donations in real time.

Implications



Many Canadian food and beverage manufacturers are embedding population nutrition and obesity within their policy approaches and strategies, and some companies are making meaningful commitments to improve the food environment.



If companies follow through with policies and commitments, there is considerable potential for positive changes to the Canadian food environment.



Across all companies, there is room for improvement in policies and commitments related to population nutrition and obesity prevention.



Leadership from food companies is critical. The significant commitments and actions taken by some food companies identified in this evaluation demonstrate that development and implementation of such policies is possible.



There are gaps in the current voluntary industry policies and commitments. Government regulation may level the playing field to ensure that all companies are doing their part to improve the healthfulness of the food environment.



This was the first study to assess the policies and commitments of the largest food and beverage manufacturers in Canada, and provides considerable insight into the Canadian food environment.



This study did not assess performance of companies, for example, the nutritional quality of the company's product portfolio, or the extent and nature of less healthy food marketing, were not assessed in this study. Evaluating the performance and actions that relate to the policies and commitments outlined in this work is critical to understanding how these voluntary commitments translate into real-world practice.

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