

Creating healthier food environments in Canada:

Current policies and priority actions



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Access the full report at:

www.labbelab.utoronto.ca/Food-EPI-Canada-2017

Executive Summary

This study used the **Food Environment Policy Index** (Food-EPI) tool developed by **INFORMAS** (International Network for Food and Obesity/Non-communicable disease Research, Monitoring and Action Support) to examine the state of food environment policy in Canada compared to internationally-established good practices in critical policy domains, using a 6 step process:

1. Comprehensively identify food environment policies in place in Canada as of January 1, 2017
2. Verify this information with government stakeholders and assemble an Expert Panel
3. Conduct online surveys to rate provincial and territorial policies compared to international benchmarks of current best practices
4. Conduct full-day workshops to rate federal policies compared to international good practices and identify policy and infrastructure support actions to improve food environments
5. Refine policy and infrastructure support actions
6. Prioritize actions to identify the most important and achievable actions for Canada

Food environment and health

It is well established that food choices are heavily influenced by the food environment. The types and quality of foods that are available to us, the cost, and the marketing of those foods all influence what we consume daily, with an ultimate influence on our overall health. In Canada, diet-related conditions, including obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are high and rising. Nutrition related behaviours are now the greatest contributor to mortality worldwide and within Canada. Changes, both large and incremental, are necessary to help Canadians eat healthy.

Policy action to improve the food environment

It has become clear that the food environment is greatly shaped by the policy environment, and policy action is needed from governments to shift the food environment towards one that can promote healthy diets among the Canadian population. Globally, many high, middle and low-income countries are providing leadership in implementing food environment policies, regulations and programs at the national, state and local level. This research aimed to evaluate policies and actions that federal, provincial and territorial governments are taking to create a healthier food environment in Canada, and to prioritize areas for action to address any current policy gaps.

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Expert opinions on food environment policy in Canada

A panel of more than 70 non-governmental experts from 44 universities and non-governmental and professional organizations from across Canada gathered to comprehensively assess Canadian food environment policies compared to international benchmarks of current best practices.

From this process, a set of prioritized recommendations for federal government actions emerged, and specific policy recommendations for each participating province and territory were made to improve the food environment and provide the infrastructure necessary to support implementing effective policy.



Federal Results



Areas where the Federal Government is doing particularly well:

Food Labelling: Requiring comprehensive nutrition information on food labels



Food Prices: Reducing the federal tax (GST) of basic groceries, which are typically healthier food options



Leadership: Strong political leadership for healthy food environments from key government representatives



Governance: Policies to ensure transparency and reduce conflict of interest in policy-making



Monitoring: Monitoring NCD prevalence and risk factors



Areas where little or no policy implementation was evident compared to some of the most promising international practices:

Food Labelling: National policies or strategies for menu labelling



Food Prices: Taxing beverages or foods high in nutrients of public health concern (such as sugary drinks)



Food Provision: Policies in government-funded settings to provide healthy foods and support healthy food choices



Food Retail: Support for healthy food policies in food stores and food service outlets



Health in All Policies: Taking a health-in-all-policies approach, which would include assessments of nutrition and health in all government policies



Federal Prioritized Actions

According to the experts consulted during this study, the areas that were most important and achievable, and were prioritized for action, included:

▸ Federal Policy Actions

1

Prohibit advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to children under the age of 17 through all forms of media, with an eventual goal to prohibit all advertising to children

4

Include a declaration and % Daily Value for free sugar content in the Nutrition Facts table and in front-of-package labelling schemes

2

Implement targets for the food supply for sodium, free sugar, and saturated fat content in packaged and restaurant foods using a structured voluntary approach

5

Develop overall nutritional criteria required for food or drink products to carry a health or nutrient content claim

3

Implement an excise tax on all sugary drinks, and invest the revenue to address public health

6

Extend the Nutrition Facts table requirements to more foods, and require websites for packaged foods to display the Nutrition Facts table online



Federal Infrastructure Support Actions

5

1 Develop publicly stated population-level intake targets for sodium, saturated fat, free sugar, and vegetables and fruit, and monitor progress over time

3 Monitor and revise the Healthy Eating Strategy with a timeline for policy action and a long term vision beyond the current election cycle

2 Implement revisions for a more comprehensive, multi-component Canada's Food Guide including environmental impact, sustainability and cultural appropriateness, with resources for both the public and practitioners/ policy makers

4 Include specific actions in the Healthy Eating Strategy to improve population nutrition among vulnerable and disadvantages groups, broadly defined

5 Mandate the regular collection of food security data in the Canadian Community Health Survey across all provinces and territories

Provincial & Territorial Results



Policy highlights and areas where provinces and territories are meeting international benchmarks:

- Quebec is a world leader and international benchmark for banning all marketing to children across all media
- Ontario has implemented mandatory calorie labelling in chain restaurants and other regulated food service premises
- British Columbia has set trans fat limits for the composition of away-from-home foods in all foodservice outlets
- Alberta has mechanisms for funding food environment research and monitoring, and has funded large food environment research projects in the previous 12 months
- Quebec has taken steps to move towards a health-in-all-policies approach for both food and non-food policies
- All provinces and territories have some form of monitoring for NCD prevalence and risk factors
- All provinces and territories have legislation that makes government information available upon request, therefore increasing public access, and all provinces and territories have budgets available online

Areas where little or no policy implementation was evident across most provinces or territories compared to some of the most promising international practices:

- Policies regarding advertising to children
- Taxes on unhealthy foods or beverages
- Retail-related policies or support for retailers and food service outlets to offer and promote healthier food choices
- Monitoring of food environments
- Providing opportunities for communication with the food sector
- Concrete actions to incorporate health-in-all-policies approaches

Provincial & Territorial Priorities

According to the experts consulted during this study, the areas that were most commonly ranked as highly important and achievable across the provinces and territories in this study included:

Provincial and Territorial Policy Actions

1

Provide a universal fruit and vegetable program in all schools

4

Examine current school curricula with regards to food literacy, and introduce food literacy and food skills training as a mandatory component of school curricula

2

Strengthen school nutrition standards, and harmonize these standards to have a consistent guideline for foods served in settings where children gather

5

Restrict marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children under the age of 17 in public settings frequented by children

3

Strengthen nutrition standards and procurement policies for public sector settings and provide support for successful implementation of these policies

6

Implement a point-of-sale sales tax on all sugary drinks, and invest the revenue to address public health as appropriate to provincial/territorial context



Provincial and Territorial Infrastructure Support Actions

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1

Establish an up-to-date strategy or framework for public health nutrition and healthy eating with comprehensive food environment considerations

4

Establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and publish annual progress reports and assess long-term trends

2

Acknowledge and endorse the importance of public health nutrition and obesity and NCD prevention strategies

5

Establish a Healthy Eating Committee that includes representation from all sectors (government, private sector and civil society)

3

Work with First Nations/ Inuit/ Metis leadership and others to develop a comprehensive strategy to promote access, availability, and affordability of healthy foods for Indigenous populations on and off reserve within the context of local foodways and cultural traditions

Priority Actions for Each Province or Territory

According to the experts in this study, the top three policy areas (numbered 1 to 3) and top two infrastructure support areas (numbered 4 and 5) that were most important and achievable, and were prioritized for action, included:

Alberta

1. Fund a provincial fruit and vegetable program in primary and secondary schools
2. Extend current nutrition guidelines to be mandatory in all publicly-funded and child-directed settings
3. Reduce restrictions for zoning requirements to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, focussing on designated, underserved neighbourhoods
4. Establish an up-to-date provincial strategy or framework for public health nutrition and healthy eating with comprehensive food environment considerations
5. Regularly report on provincial dietary intakes using data from national surveys, stratified by socio-demographic factors associated with health inequities

British Columbia

1. Implement a point-of-sale sales tax on all sugary drinks, and invest the revenue into public health programming
2. Develop agricultural policies and subsidies that incentivize production, processing, distribution and consumption of vegetables, fruits and legumes
3. Require all government-funded programs involving supplied food for children to meet the provincial nutrition guidelines for schools
4. Acknowledge and endorse the importance of provincial public health nutrition and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
5. Establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities

Manitoba

1. Require all programs involving subsidised or supplied food for children that are funded by the province to meet Manitoba's Nutrition Guidelines
2. Implement targets for sodium, free sugar, and saturated fat in the foods provided in restaurant and food service outlets using a structured voluntary approach
3. Develop a harmonized nutrition guideline for children and youth, applied in a mandatory fashion to all publicly-funded and child-directed settings
4. Acknowledge and endorse the importance of provincial public health nutrition and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
5. Work with First Nations/ Inuit/ Metis leadership and others to develop a comprehensive strategy to promote access, availability, and affordability of healthy foods for Indigenous populations on and off reserve

New Brunswick

1. Require all publicly funded programs involving subsidised or supplied food for children to meet nutrition standards
 2. Develop agricultural policies and subsidies that incentivize production, processing, distribution and consumption of vegetables, fruits and legumes
 3. Actively support the implementation of Policy AD-1709 to provide and promote healthy food choices in food service activities
 4. Acknowledge and endorse the importance of provincial public health nutrition and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
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New Brunswick

5. Update the Public Health Nutrition Framework for Action with concrete actions and implementation plan and timeline complement the federal actions of the Healthy Eating Strategy
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Newfoundland & Labrador

1. Implement a provincial minimum basic income
 2. Introduce a provincial policy restricting marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children under the age of 17 in schools and public settings frequented by children
 3. Implement a point-of-sale sales tax on all sugary drinks, and invest the revenue from the tax into public health
 4. Work with First Nations/ Inuit/ Metis leadership and others to develop a comprehensive strategy to promote access, availability, and affordability of healthy foods for Indigenous populations on and off reserve
 5. Develop clear provincial guidelines for establishing relationships with the food industry, including policy development and public private partnerships
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Northwest Territories

1. Implement a point-of-sale sales tax on all sugary drinks, and invest the revenue from the tax into public health
 2. Introduce a comprehensive territorial policy restricting marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children under the age of 17 in child-directed settings
 3. Fund a universal territorial fruit and vegetable program in all schools
 4. Acknowledge and endorse the importance of territorial public health nutrition and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
 5. Work with First Nations/ Inuit/ Metis leadership and others to develop a comprehensive strategy to promote access, availability, and affordability of healthy foods for Indigenous populations on and off reserve
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Nova Scotia

1. Implement the Guidelines for Healthy Eating in Recreation and Sport Settings as a mandatory policy in all recreation and sports settings.
 2. Implement a mandatory provincial menu labelling policy
 3. Fund a universal provincial fruit and vegetable program in schools
 4. Establish stable and ongoing provincial research funding opportunities for food environment and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
 5. Increase the opportunity for policy-maker and researcher partnerships for the development, monitoring and evaluation of government policies
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Ontario

1. Update the Healthy Menu Choices Act to provide additional information for sodium on menus, complemented by a menu labelling education campaign
 2. Implement a point-of-sale sales tax on all sugary drinks and reinvest the revenue from the tax into public health
 3. Implement policies including public procurement standards to provide and promote healthy food choices in public sector settings
 4. Acknowledge and endorse the importance of provincial public health nutrition and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
 5. Continue to support the Healthy Kids Community Challenge and invest in additional themes that promote healthy eating behaviours
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Prince Edward Island

1. Require the implementation of the Healthy Living Guidelines for Early Learning and Child Care Centres on Prince Edward Island in all PEI early childhood education settings
2. Establish an ongoing support service delivered by experienced dietitians to train for implementing nutrition standards in public sector settings
3. Require all programs involving subsidised or supplied food funded by the province to meet the School Food and Nutrition Policy
4. Establish an up-to-date provincial food and nutrition strategy to maintain efforts from the PEI Healthy Eating Strategy and the Wellness Strategy
5. Establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities

Quebec

1. Require food literacy and food skills as mandatory in primary and secondary schools
2. Implement targets for sodium, free sugar and saturated fat in restaurant foods
3. Implement a provincial basic income guarantee
4. Establish provincial research funding opportunities for food environment and obesity and NCD prevention strategies
5. Implement, monitor and evaluate the Politique gouvernementale de prévention en santé

Saskatchewan

1. Fund a provincial fruit and vegetable program in schools, with a focus on schools with a high proportion of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds
2. Require all programs that are funded by the province to meet the healthy school nutrition standards for Saskatchewan
3. Implement a provincial basic income guarantee
4. Implement formal health impact assessments as part of food and non-food policy development and establish health impact assessment capacity
5. Develop public provincial targets for population intakes of nutrients of concern

Yukon

1. Fund a universal territorial fruit and vegetable program in schools
 2. Implement a point-of-sale sales tax on all sugary drinks, and invest the revenue from the tax to targeted areas that address public health
 3. Develop a subsidy program to increase local capacity for food production and innovation and community-based interventions to address food sovereignty issues in Yukon
 4. Develop and implement community-wide structures with associated resources to provide broad and coordinated support for community-based interventions to create and support healthy food environments
 5. Establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities
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Implications for Policy

Canadian provincial, territorial and federal governments met global best practice in some, but not all, policy areas that are the most critical to improve the food environment in Canada. Leadership is needed from all federal, provincial, and territorial decision makers to establish a comprehensive strategy to address unhealthy diets and rates of diet-related NCDs. This research demonstrates that food environment policies differ greatly across jurisdictions in Canada, and that there are many areas where governments could act to improve the food environment. Comprehensive, cohesive and coordinated action between jurisdictions, departments and agencies are often needed to provide a comprehensive policy framework to achieve targeted public health nutrition goals. It is our hope that this research will help guide the food and nutrition policy agenda in Canada in the coming years.

Policy makers and others are encouraged to also examine the broad range of policy actions in other Canadian and international jurisdictions beyond those rated as the current priority actions. These contain a wealth of additional actions for consideration, particularly as the policy landscape nationally and globally continues to strengthen and evolve in many areas.

Nutrition related risk factors account for the largest mortality burden in Canada and across the world. Globally, many governments are demonstrating significant leadership by implementing policies and government infrastructure to support healthier food environments, and to make the healthy choice the easier choice. High rates of NCDs are thought to be one of the greatest obstacles in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. As international governments innovate with novel policies to address rising rates of diet-related NCDs and obesity, Canadian governments will need to continue to act and build upon current policies to ensure they do not fall behind in their duty to protect and promote the health and wellness of Canadians. Monitoring and evaluating policy implementation and impact is also critical to ensure that policies are achieving the desired results, and will contribute to our understanding of the effectiveness of these policies more broadly.

What next?

We will be repeating the Food-EPI Canada process in several years, to examine progress in implementing policy and infrastructure supports to improve the food environment. Ongoing monitoring of policies and efforts will increase accountability of governments to implement policies, and help establish the roadmap for food environment policy in Canada in the years to come.

Additionally, as governments world wide continue to introduce and evaluate innovated policies directed at improving the food environment, a richer inventory of possible policy actions for consideration will no doubt continue to develop.



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