

# National Nutrition Strategy

## Evidence brief

### Dietitians Australia position

There is an urgent need for the Federal Government to update the 1992 National Food and Nutrition Policy into an up-to-date National Nutrition Strategy with a well-resourced, co-ordinated, evidence-based and strategic action plan.

### Policy recommendations

1. The Federal Government must:
  - a. Allocate adequate funding and provide the structure to develop a National Nutrition Strategy and a National Nutrition Implementation Action Plan
  - b. Commit to a comprehensive, ongoing national monitoring and evaluation program to benchmark and assess Australia's food and nutrition system, and report progress on international targets<sup>1-4</sup>
2. A new National Nutrition Strategy must:<sup>5</sup>
  - a. Provide food and nutrition security for all Australians
  - b. Address increasing rates of diet-related chronic diseases including malnutrition
  - c. Address the overrepresentation of unhealthy ultra-processed foods in our food supply
  - d. Promote and enable sustainable eating patterns with low environmental impact
  - e. Implement policy actions that support the Australian Dietary Guidelines
  - f. Align with international<sup>1, 4, 6-8</sup> and domestic<sup>5, 9, 10</sup> policy advice
  - g. Involve sectors beyond health, such as agriculture and trade
  - h. Have strong synergies with the National Preventive Health Strategy, Australian Breastfeeding Strategy and National Obesity Prevention Strategy
  - i. Ensure a food and nutrition system free from conflicts of interest<sup>6</sup> and voluntary industry actions which undermine public health advances<sup>11</sup>

### Background

Australia last updated its national nutrition policy in 1992. Since that time, the diet-related health of Australians has become worse. 27,500 Australians die a preventable death each year from an unhealthy diet. Many diseases are caused or exacerbated by a poor diet, including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, bowel cancer and lung cancer. Food insecurity is also on the rise in Australia. We're at a turning point for the health of our nation. The social and economic costs of Australia's poor diet-related health are growing.

An up-to-date National Nutrition Strategy would align with the draft National Preventive Health Strategy<sup>8</sup> where the need for food and nutrition action guided by a specific policy document is acknowledged. It would also be an essential component of the National Obesity Prevention Strategy<sup>9</sup> and the National Breastfeeding Strategy<sup>10</sup> and would deliver multiple complementary benefits in terms of health, the economy, equity and environmental sustainability.

## Evidence

### Australia's unhealthy eating patterns

Nationally, less than 1% of the population report eating patterns consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.<sup>12</sup> In 2017-2018, around 90% of Australians weren't eating enough vegetables and more than 35% of energy intake was from unhealthy foods and drinks high in added sugar, saturated fat, salt or alcohol.<sup>12-14</sup> Australian families are now spending 58% of their food budget on unhealthy foods and drinks.<sup>15</sup>

Eating patterns are influenced by factors including affordability,<sup>16-19</sup> composition of the food supply<sup>20-22</sup> and promotion of unhealthy food for commercial profit.<sup>23-25</sup> These vary greatly across Australia, presenting issues of inequality.

### Consequences of unhealthy eating patterns

Unhealthy eating patterns are now the leading preventable risk factor contributing to the burden of death and disease globally, including for Australia.<sup>26, 27</sup> In 2015-2016, an estimated \$1.4 billion of healthcare expenditure was attributable to insufficient vegetable intake.<sup>28</sup> Unhealthy eating patterns are a major contributor to the estimated \$8.6 billion in annual health care costs and lost productivity from overweight and obesity in Australia.<sup>29</sup>

If it was easier for Australians to enjoy healthy foods and drinks consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines<sup>12</sup> the disease burden amongst the community would be reduced by 62% for coronary heart disease, 34-38% for stroke, 41% for type 2 diabetes, 37% for mouth, pharyngeal and laryngeal cancer, 22-29% for bowel cancer, 20% for oesophageal cancer, 12% for prostate cancer, 8% for lung cancer and 2% for stomach cancer.<sup>13, 14, 30</sup>

Groups who experience greater social disadvantage through relative lack of opportunity in education, employment, and income suffer increased risk of malnutrition, food insecurity and diet-related chronic disease.<sup>31, 32</sup>

### Supporting healthy eating patterns

Globally and nationally, there is broad agreement about what constitutes healthy eating patterns and strong evidence around the most cost-effective nutrition policy actions to enable healthy eating.<sup>1, 4, 7, 8, 12, 33</sup> Recent studies have shown that much more can be done to combat unhealthy eating in Australia.<sup>33, 34</sup>

Contemporary food and nutrition strategies should be underscored by four pillars: health, equity, environmental sustainability, and monitoring and evaluation. The most effective national food and nutrition strategies internationally are centrally coordinated, multisectoral, adequately resourced, championed within and outside government, free from vested interests and regularly monitored, reviewed, revised and evaluated.<sup>5</sup> For more detail, see our [National Nutrition Strategy background paper](#).

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