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Healthy and sustainable diets

Position brief

Dietitians Australia position

It is the position of Dietitians Australia that to promote human and planetary health, a food system transformation is needed that supports the population to adopt healthy and sustainable diet-related practices. A healthy and sustainable diet must (i) be nutritionally adequate, healthy and safe, (ii) have low environmental impact and be protective of natural resources and biodiversity, (iii) be culturally acceptable and (iv) be accessible, economically fair and affordable. Dietitians Australia acknowledges that it is critical to prioritise Indigenous knowledges in consultation, policymaking and implementation processes to achieve these recommendations. In facilitating the uptake of healthy and sustainable diets, dietitians are contributing to the transformation of our current food system that is urgently required to nourish present and future generations within planetary boundaries.[1]

Policy recommendations

Based on Dietitians Australia's expertise, capacity to influence action and positioning within this policy area, the following four recommendations have been prioritised:

1. The development of a comprehensive, adequately resourced National Nutrition Strategy which honours Indigenous knowledges on food systems, detailing a strategic plan to improve health, equity and sustainability outcomes of our food system.
2. The prominent integration of ecological sustainability principles in the next iteration of Australia's dietary guidelines, to foster a population-wide demand for healthy and sustainable food to trigger and support change across the whole food system.
3. The reorientation of our food environment to prioritise access to healthy and sustainable dietary food options, including (i) a food labelling scheme which integrates health and ecological outcomes, (ii) settings-based approaches (eg food procurement policies for food services, retail and public facilities) and (iii) supportive federal and state policy to facilitate local government action.
4. Investment in capacity building activities for our current and future nutrition and dietetics workforce, including more opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to contribute to food system transformation through collective partnerships, effective tertiary education and continuing professional development.

It is critical that the opportunity is prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to be involved in the further development and translation of these recommendations into practice and policy.[1]

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Evidence

Indigenous Peoples of the world have managed sustainable food systems for millennia, providing food, livelihoods and well-being to humankind.[2] The way food is produced and consumed has changed drastically over recent decades and disregards Indigenous knowledge of human-ecology interaction and its balance.[3, 4] As we attempt to mitigate the effects of climate change and an increasing prevalence of diet-related disease, Indigenous Peoples' knowledges of sustainable food systems can provide insights, lessons and evidence.[2, 5]

This relationship between our food system and our climate is bidirectional. Climate change and poor environmental conditions also affects our food supply and security, for example through decreased crop yield, availability and quality, which adversely affects health.[6] This requires a change to both food production and consumption practices to ensure current and future generations are nourished within planetary boundaries.[3] Global targets are an effective mechanism for driving such change,[7] such as Agenda 2030,[8] the Paris Agreement[9] and the United Nations' Decade of Action on Nutrition.[10] Efforts to improve our food system can have far-reaching benefits – improving food security and nutrition, social and gender equity, community resilience and more.[11]

In Australia, the way our food is produced, manufactured, distributed and consumed is contributing to climate change and malnutrition in all its forms.[12, 13] Our agricultural sector is responsible for 16% of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions as well as biodiversity loss, water consumption and unsustainable land management practices.[14] This is only worsened by the fact that unhealthy foods (high saturated fat, added sugar and salt) account for 27% of diet-related emissions.[15-17] Unhealthy dietary patterns are the leading preventable risk factor for chronic disease, particularly amongst lower socio-economic groups.[18, 13]

It is agreed that a whole-of-system approach is required, and efforts to promote healthy and sustainable diets can trigger action across the entire food system.[11, 19] The food system has six phases which make up 'the interconnected system of everything and everybody that influences, and is influenced by, the activities involved in bringing food from farm to fork and beyond':[20] (i) agricultural production, (ii) distribution, transport and trade, (iii) processing, (iv) food retail/service, (v) consumption, and (vi) waste and disposal. The points of intersection between diet and this broader food system present a great opportunity to achieve systemic transformation, in particular, efforts to promote the consumption of healthy and sustainable diets.[20]

In 2012, the Food and Agriculture Organisation defined healthy and sustainable diets as those with 'low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations.'[21] Since then, defining and promoting healthy and sustainable diets has been an emerging topic of research and practice. In 2014, three broad principles of healthy and sustainable diets were identified: (i) avoiding overconsumption, (ii) reducing discretionary food intake, and (iii) eating less animal and more plant-derived foods.[22]

In 2019, the planetary health diet was recommended by the EAT-Lancet Commission to nourish global populations within planetary boundaries.[3] This reference diet is largely plant-based with optional inclusion of fish, meat and dairy foods and have since prompted research to explore the application and feasibility of this planetary health diet.[3] In terms of affordability, a healthy and

sustainable diet was shown to be less expensive than the typical Australian food basket nationally, in all metropolitan areas and socio-economic groups in Australia.[23] Whilst the recommendations of the EAT Lancet Commission may not be appropriate for all people due to a range of individual and local factors, the broad principles of this diet must be considered in the Australian context.

Dietitians have a key role to play in facilitating the required food system transformation. Dietetic practice promote healthy and sustainable diets at various levels, for example in food-based dietary guidelines at the population-level, food procurement and menu planning policies at an institutional-level and in nutrition education to client groups, community groups and other health professionals, and medical nutrition therapy at the group and individual level.[24, 25] In terms of providing specific dietary advice, dietitians can promote these practices, which describe the many activities a person engages in to source, store, prepare, consume and dispose of the food they eat.[26]

Box 1. Healthy and sustainable food-related practices

Where to source food?

- Strengthen local food systems by connecting with primary producers
- Eat seasonally, incorporating native and wild-harvested foods
- Eat locally available foods
- Select food grown using sustainable food production practices, valuing Indigenous knowledges

What to eat?

- Avoid over-consumption beyond caloric requirement
- Consume no more than recommended animal-derived foods
- Limit intake of ultra-processed, nutrient-poor and over-packaged food
- Increase intake of plant-based foods
- Eat a wide variety of foods to promote biodiversity

How to eat?

- Adopt food waste-minimisation strategies
- Preference home-made meals and share with others
- Consume safe tap water as preferred drink
- Breastfeed infants where possible

Each diet-related practice promotes both human and planetary health, however, must be considered as part of a larger inter-connected system. For example, choosing the right types of foods to eat as defined by the EAT-Lancet Commission's planetary health diet, will only have desired environmental benefits if those foods are sustainably sourced and the associated waste processed responsibly.[3, 26]

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