



**TALKING
POINT**

NOURISH NOT NEGLECT

Putting health on our nation's table





REIGNITING THE CONVERSATION

Poor dietary habits and obesity are now the two leading preventable risk factors contributing to the burden of disease, in Australia and internationally.¹ In Australia, 10% of the total burden of disease is attributed to poor diets, with an additional 8.5% attributed to obesity.²

Globally, it is the United Nations 'Decade of Action on Nutrition', 2016 - 2025.³ The importance of nutrition is already making headlines in 2019, with the recent release of the Lancet Commission on the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change⁴ and the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets and Sustainable Food Systems.⁵ These highlight the urgent need to address poor nutrition as the key strategy to improve health and wellbeing, equity, environmental sustainability and productivity. As nutrition science continues to evolve, we owe it to Australians to ensure that nutrition recommendations are guided by the most current research available.

Australia has not updated its National Nutrition Policy in over 26 years. During this time the health of our nation has deteriorated.

Over two-thirds (67%) of Australian adults and around 25% of Australian children are now overweight or obese.⁶ The prevalence of overweight and obesity among adults, for which poor diet is the major driver,⁷ has increased by 10% over the past 24 years.⁶ Even more alarmingly, this figure is expected to increase. Projections suggest that by 2025, 83% of men and 75% of women aged 20 years or older, will have overweight or obesity.⁸

It is time for the Australian Government to take charge of the nutritional health of our nation. We can do this by updating the 1992 National Nutrition Policy. This is an essential first step of any National Obesity Strategy⁹ and would deliver multiple benefits in terms of health, equity, environmental sustainability and productivity to Australia.

This talking point aims to put food and nutrition on the agenda in Australia and outlines the proactive steps needed to make a new National Nutrition Policy a reality.

Our call to action is supported by key health groups through a Joint Position Statement,¹⁰ including the Public Health Association of Australia, Nutrition Australia and the National Heart Foundation of Australia.



AUSTRALIA'S HEALTH CHECK

Almost one in two adults now experience a chronic disease, many of which arise from poor diet and/or obesity,⁶ including Type 2 Diabetes, Heart Disease, Arthritis and some Cancers. The implications of these conditions are outlined in **Figure 1**. The social and economic cost of poor nutrition continues to grow.

However, less than 1% of the population report they consume a diet consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.⁷ These guidelines are informed by an extensive evidence base on the relationship between food, nutrition and health. If Australians had eating patterns that aligned with these recommendations, the total burden of disease would reduce dramatically, with heart disease reducing by 52%, type 2 diabetes by 34% and diet-related cancers by up to 37%.¹¹

Australia's poor dietary intake is characterised by having over 35% of energy intake derived from unhealthy, discretionary foods and drinks (those high in saturated fat, added sugar, salt and alcohol that are not needed for health).¹² Australian families are now spending 58% of their food budget on discretionary (energy dense, nutrient poor) choices.¹³

Poor diets are driven by unhealthy food environments that heavily market poor food and drinks, such as the ubiquitous availability and advertising of discretionary choices.

A recent review of national, state and territory government actions, across 42 policy areas related to food environments, highlights the need for greater national policy co-ordination and consistency to support Australians to lead healthier lives.¹⁴

To address Australia's growing health and societal issues, the Australian Government needs to develop, fund and implement a new National Nutrition Policy. Not only will this reduce the incidence and prevalence of diet-related chronic disease risk factors and conditions among Australians, but it will also improve nutrition for the benefit of Australia's health, wellbeing, sustainability and prosperity.¹⁰

We face a **turning point** when it comes to the nutritional health of our nation. We need to take action before it's too late.

Figure 1: A snapshot of Australia's health



Obesity



67% of Australian adults are overweight or obese¹



Higher prevalence in regional, rural and remote regions¹



Annual costs are estimated >\$50 billion for health care and lost productivity²



Poor diet is a leading contributor to obesity³



Type 2 Diabetes



Experienced by 1 million Australian adults¹



Highest occurrence in low socioeconomic areas⁴



Health care, lost productivity and carer costs up to \$6 billion/year⁵



Overweight/obesity = risk factor of Type 2 Diabetes⁶



Heart Disease

1 in 20

Affects around 1 in 20 Australian adults¹

1

Leading cause of death in Australia⁷



Direct cost of \$2.38 billion/year⁸



Unhealthy eating increases risk of heart disease¹



Arthritis



3rd most prevalent chronic disease¹



Largest contributor to pain and disability in Australia⁹



Direct costs estimated to exceed \$5.5 billion/year¹⁰



79% of those with arthritis experienced an additional chronic disease⁹



Cancer

1 in 50

1 in 50 Australian adults affected by cancer¹

30%

Diet is associated with at least 30% of all cancers.¹¹



Direct cancer costs Australian health services over \$6 billion a year¹²



Healthy foods can help lower cancer prevalence.¹³

Infographic references can be found at the end of the report.

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL NUTRITION POLICY

When developed in 1992, Australia's National Nutrition Policy was globally progressive,¹⁵ but the nation's food and nutrition landscape and international best practice guidelines have evolved dramatically since then.

In 2013, the Australian Government commissioned a Scoping Study to inform the development of a new National Nutrition Policy.¹⁶ The report was released under a Freedom of Information request in 2016.

From the results of systematic reviews of effective global nutrition policy actions and consideration of food and nutrition issues in Australia, the Scoping Study¹⁶ made eight key recommendations to guide the development of a new National Nutrition Policy, as summarised in **Figure 2**.

The first of the recommendations outlines guiding principles, putting healthy, equitable, sustainable and measurable food and nutrition at the core of the new policy. The other recommendations outline practical steps to deliver an evidence-informed, world-class, new National Nutrition Policy that places Australia's interests at its heart.

Little action has been taken by the Government in regard to recommendations in the Scoping Study. In a drive to raise awareness of the importance of nutrition and the benefits of a new National Nutrition Policy, uptake of the recommendations of the Scoping Study was supported by key health advocacy organisations, including the Dietitians Association of Australia, the Public Health Association of Australia, the National Heart Foundation of Australia and Nutrition Australia in a 2017 joint statement, entitled '*Towards a National Nutrition Policy for Australia*'.^{10, 17} This call to action, was further updated by the Public Health Association of Australia in 2018.¹⁸

A new National Nutrition Policy would address the rising prevalence and healthcare costs of diet-related chronic disease, and help improve food and nutrition security, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, the nutritional needs of vulnerable Australians, sustainability, social equity and productivity. It would take into account key food supply influences, such as agriculture, environment and trade. A contemporary policy would integrate key current policy tools and programs including: the Australian Dietary Guidelines (due for review), Nutrient Reference Values (under ongoing review), food labelling initiatives (including the Health Star Rating system), relevant taxes and laws and monitoring and surveillance systems.¹⁷

Figure 2: Scoping study recommendations for the National Nutrition Policy





CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE

Updating the National Nutrition Policy is imperative to ensure a co-ordinated and collaborative approach is undertaken to improve food and nutrition-related health and reduce the adverse outcomes due to poor diet in Australia.

Specifically, a new National Nutrition Policy would create positive change¹⁷ by:

1. Co-ordinating both government and non-government strategies towards reducing the burden of diet-related disease.
2. Providing structures to systematically reduce diet-related health inequalities.
3. Contributing to increased prosperity.
4. Securing an environmentally sustainable food and nutrition system.
5. Reflecting international and national best-practice activities, to keep Australia's nutrition approach current on the world stage.

WE NEED TO ACT NOW

Food is the foundation of everyday lives. Just as dietary variety is needed to optimise nutrient intakes and for good health and well-being, a multi-faceted approach to policy and decision making is required to nourish all Australians.

Government support at all levels is critical in both development of policy actions and implementation and evaluation of efforts to manage and prevent diet related risk factors and chronic disease. A bipartisan, whole of government approach to the National Nutrition Policy is key to ensure cost-efficiency, effectiveness and sustained action.¹⁷

To achieve this, the Dietitians Association of Australia is calling for the Australian Government to rejuvenate the National Nutrition Policy through development, implementation and evaluation strategies:

Development:

1. Develop a discussion paper informed by the Scoping Study,¹⁶ including national collaborative and consultative workshops. This paper should cover the rationale, vision, objectives, strategies and impacts and outcomes of the National Nutrition Policy.
2. Assign funding and set up governance structures to develop a National Nutrition Policy that includes existing government initiatives, includes evidence-based new initiatives and uses a clear strategy to outline accountability.
3. Appoint an expert oversight group and engage external consultants to develop the National Nutrition Policy.
4. Release the draft National Nutrition Policy for public consultation.

Implementation:

1. Complete, release, fund, set up and action the National Nutrition Policy, through a ten-year implementation and action plan. This will outline accountability and responsibility of all key stakeholders.
2. Identify long-term funding for continued investment and capacity to achieve long-term outcomes through a multi-strategy, multi-sectoral approach.

Evaluation:

1. Commit to a quality food and nutrition monitoring and surveillance system to support evaluation of the National Nutrition Policy and its continued implementation and review.
2. Report key targets to the World Health Organisation (WHO), and Food and Agricultural Organisation, as part of Australian obligations to the response to the Rome Declaration, the United Nations 'Decade of Action on Nutrition' and the WHO Voluntary Global NCD Targets.

Further information can be found in the Joint Position Statement.^{10, 17}



CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

We want to hear from you. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the Joint Position Statement or wish to show your support for the National Nutrition Policy, please visit daa.asn.au and email advocacy@daa.asn.au.

ABOUT US

The Dietitians Association of Australia is Australia's largest and most influential organisation for dietetic and nutrition professionals, representing a growing membership of 6,900 dietitians across Australia and overseas. Our mission is to support our members and advocate for important issues that impact the health of the Australian community, such as obesity, disability and mental health.

Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government, Medicare, the Department of Veteran Affairs and most private health funds as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia. For more information visit: daa.asn.au

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This talking point relates to the important findings of the National Nutrition Policy Scoping Study¹⁶ and the Joint Position Statement by Dietitians Association of Australia, Public Health Association of Australia, Nutrition Australia and the National Heart Foundation of Australia.^{10,17}

No responsibility is accepted by DAA, its Board or its members for the accuracy of the advice provided or for the quality of advice or decisions made by others based on the information presented in this publication.

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FIGURE 1 REFERENCES

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