



Promotion and Support of Healthy Eating:

*An Initial Overview of Knowledge
Gaps and Research Needs*

SUMMARY REPORT

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Our mission is to help the people of Canada maintain and improve their health.

Health Canada

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Promotion and Support of Healthy Eating: An Initial Overview of Knowledge Gaps and Research Needs

Summary Report

Purpose and Scope

Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion has completed a project to obtain an initial picture of major gaps in the knowledge base concerning the determinants of healthy eating and effective policy and program interventions to promote and support healthy eating. The findings are intended as a first step for collaborative work to identify healthy eating research priorities by Health Canada and other government partners, appropriate research funding bodies, researchers and practitioners. Information was gathered through review of selected documents, and meetings and telephone interviews with 52 key informants including Health Canada staff, nutrition researchers, provincial and territorial government representatives, nutrition practitioners, and representatives of NGOs.

The project identified gaps in knowledge about individual determinants (e.g. personal knowledge, attitudes, capacities) and environmental (e.g. social, economic, educational) determinants of healthy eating. Gaps in the knowledge base about effective policy and program interventions targeted at the individual and population level were also identified.

Key informants also noted critical information which is needed to complement healthy eating research, even though it is outside the scope of the project. The urgent need for ongoing, systematic and timely national food and nutrition surveillance information was seen by every key informant as an extremely high priority. Better information is also needed on the definition of what constitutes healthy eating, the safety and quality of the food supply, and food composition.

General Findings

Knowledge gaps identified by the project clearly show that healthy eating is a cross-cutting issue which will require the involvement of many different fields of research, within and beyond the nutrition and health fields. A range of public and private health and social science research funding sources in Canada and internationally could be potential sources of support.

Many key informants noted the need for more emphasis on theory-based work. They felt progress will be slow unless the study of determinants of healthy eating and the development and evaluation of interventions to promote and support healthy eating occurs within the context of building a cohesive theoretical framework. There is a need for research to develop knowledge about the determinants of healthy eating in applied intervention settings, so that the knowledge base on determinants and interventions is advanced in an integrated, theory-based way.

All key informants identified the need to consolidate, synthesize and disseminate/share what is already known about the determinants of healthy eating and effective policy and program interventions. This is necessary to develop appropriate research agendas and target research at the most important knowledge gaps; to provide a base of information (even if it is limited at the present time) to help inform policy and funding decisions; and to stimulate application and evaluation of best practices. Related to this is the need for a better understanding of the applicability in Canada of knowledge on healthy eating determinants and interventions developed in other countries.

Determinants of Healthy Eating

There was wide agreement on priorities for improving the knowledge base on determinants of healthy eating.

The main emphasis in future research on determinants should be a much better understanding of the environmental factors which influence healthy eating, including their interactions with individual factors.

There is a need to better understand how and why individual and environmental determinants and their interactions operate differently in different populations and different life circumstances, with particular emphasis on nutritionally vulnerable groups. Some key informants felt that developing a more comprehensive knowledge of determinants should not be a priority, maintaining that the main emphasis should be on research to learn what interventions are most effective in what circumstances. Healthy eating should be investigated as an integrated part of research on the determinants of healthy lifestyles. There is a need for a better understanding of the common determinants of healthy eating and other health practices, particularly physical activity, including the role of factors such as resilience and self-efficacy.

Key informants also suggested examples of specific research questions to address key knowledge gaps. Questions on *environmental determinants* focused primarily on the influence of social and economic factors such as culture, social norms, family structures and dynamics, work and family responsibilities, income, and cost of and access to food; as well as the influence of food marketing and changes in the food supply including packaging, prepared and fast foods, and food safety and quality. Questions on *individual determinants* primarily addressed the impact on food choices and consumption of knowledge, perceptions and beliefs about nutrition, healthy eating, and food safety and quality – in different groups and populations; and the effect on individual perceptions and behavior of the nature and source of nutrition and healthy eating information.

Healthy Eating Policy and Program Interventions

All key informants felt that the Canadian knowledge and evidence base on healthy eating policy and program interventions is extremely weak. There has been little investment in interventions that are sufficiently comprehensive, intensive and sustained to allow evaluation of outcomes. Where interventions have been put in place, mostly at the community level, sufficient funding for rigorous evaluation is not usually available. When evaluation is done, results are seldom reported or widely shared. There is some evaluation information from interventions in other countries, but it largely addresses individual knowledge, attitudes and behaviors rather than environmental factors or interactions. And it is not clear how applicable the findings are in Canada.

Key informants suggested research questions to address key gaps in the evidence base on effective interventions in the following areas:

Overall impact of policy and program interventions, with questions primarily focused on clarifying the most cost-effective types and mix of interventions.

Food and nutrition policy interventions, focused primarily on the impact and interactions of national food policies such as nutrition labeling, food fortification, health claims, and regulation of genetically modified foods and natural health products; national nutritional guidance policies such as Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, Canada's Guidelines for Healthy Eating, and Nutrition Recommendations; and provincial/territorial and community level food and nutrition policies.

Influence of broader policies on healthy eating, focused primarily on the impact of health, education, agriculture, social services, income support, employment and economic development policies on healthy eating and food security.

Nutrition education and mass communication interventions, focused primarily on discovering the most effective program approaches for influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviors in different populations; and the best social marketing methods for reaching the individual, social network and community level.

Health service interventions, with questions focusing on the impacts of nutritional health services and access to nutrition and other health professionals.

Community-based interventions, primarily focused on key facilitators and barriers to effective community interventions, and factors that build community capacity.

Roles, partnerships and processes for effective interventions, with the main focus on learning more about the most effective approaches for collaboration, and the best ways of influencing policy and decision makers and funders around healthy eating.

Research on Specific Populations and Issues

Key informants felt that general knowledge gaps on determinants and interventions are probably best addressed through research directed to specific populations and/or nutritional health issues. The importance of focusing on nutritionally vulnerable groups and populations was repeatedly emphasized. As well, the following populations and issues were consistently noted as requiring particular emphasis.

- Children and adolescents
- Seniors
- Aboriginal peoples
- Food insecurity and food access
- Healthy weights

Healthy Eating Research Capacity in Canada

Capacity to Conduct Research. Key informants felt that problems with research capacity are a major hindrance to advancing and applying our knowledge about how to promote and support healthy eating for Canadians.

- Insufficient research funding.
- Insufficient numbers of appropriately trained and experienced researchers.
- Need for more interdisciplinary research.

Research Methods and Tools. Key informants noted a number of areas where work is needed to develop better methods and tools for conducting healthy eating research. Needs related to measurement instruments, indicators, quantitative vs. qualitative methods, surveillance tools, longitudinal studies, and different types of studies were raised.

Dissemination of Research Findings and Knowledge Transfer. All key informants emphasized the lack of supports and mechanisms for dissemination and sharing of the findings of specific healthy eating research studies, and for ongoing consolidation, synthesis and dissemination/sharing of existing and emerging knowledge. Several key informants indicated that there may already be answers, or partial answers, to some of the research questions they raised. But the lack of a consolidated knowledge base makes it extremely difficult to know, especially in the face of significant time constraints and information overload.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this project point to the need for a deliberate and coherent approach to advance our knowledge about determinants of, and effective interventions to promote and support healthy eating. The main steps in such an approach could be to:

- Consolidate, disseminate and apply existing knowledge about individual and environmental determinants of healthy eating and their interactions;
- Develop an initial theoretical framework on the effects and interactions of key individual

and environmental determinants of healthy eating – based on existing knowledge;

Make a significant investment in research to gain a better understanding of environmental determinants of and supports for healthy eating and the way these interact with individual determinants;

Invest in carefully targeted research to refine our understanding of individual determinants, focusing on major knowledge gaps;

Make a significant investment in sustained, theory-based healthy eating interventions which are designed as applied research initiatives with rigorous formative and outcome evaluation components; and

Refine the theoretical framework as new knowledge emerges.

Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion could provide leadership and advocacy for this approach, and facilitate and coordinate involvement of key partners in collaborative actions to move ahead on the different elements.

Next Steps

This project is only a first step in identifying healthy eating research priorities and developing a research agenda. The challenge now is to make the best possible use of the material presented in the paper. Because events to establish Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) strategic research priorities are moving quite quickly, it would not be desirable for Health Canada to undertake a lengthy process to validate and prioritize the knowledge gaps and research questions identified by this project, before making any use of the material. Rather, the material should be an input to various events that will occur over the next several months to consider nutrition and related research priorities and agendas for CIHR. The findings will also be helpful to Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion as it establishes linkages with the various institutes of CIHR to build awareness of healthy eating knowledge gaps and research issues, and advocate for a focus on healthy eating research.

At the same time, Health Canada could undertake or fund initiatives to move forward on needs and issues identified by this project which may not be suitable for funding by CIHR or other research funding bodies, or which require clarification or development before they could be submitted to a research funding body. Examples might include an initiative to consider possible approaches to achieve a more cohesive and coordinated approach to healthy eating research; work to set priorities for consolidation of existing knowledge on healthy eating determinants and interventions; and collaboration with others to develop a research agenda around general policy and program knowledge gaps which are not necessarily unique to healthy eating.