

In defence of Canada's Food Guide

February 1 2019, by Catherine L. Mah, J. Nicole Arsenault, Nathan Taylor And Rebecca Hasdell

Canada's new food guide is an audacious piece of [healthy public policy](#).

What's healthy public policy? It puts health on [all policy agendas](#), at all levels of government, across multiple ministries. It reminds us that government is working for all Canadians, not just a fortunate few, when it takes action on health.

One of us, Catherine Mah, provided feedback on the guide during its development. We're proud of Canada's new guidance on nutrition. But we're also optimistic about the potential for the food guide to shine a light on the broader set of circumstances —the social determinants —of how we eat.

Eating is social; so is health

At the heart of the guide is the advice that achieving healthy eating patterns is about [more than what we eat](#). It's about where, when, why and how we eat.

These aren't under any one person's control. They are the product of collective decisions, in the public and [private sector](#) —whether we make enough money at our jobs to buy food, where grocery stores are located in [local communities](#), our global trade agreements. The quality of our diets is determined by where we live, work, learn and play.

The new food guide acknowledges the diversity of these situations. It is

[less prescriptive](#) than it used to be. It explains that food skills are important, because we need them to [navigate food environments](#) where less healthy foods are often the easy choice and sometimes the only choice.

The guide helps us [tailor our efforts](#) to achieve healthy eating, through unique energy needs, life stages, cultural requirements and food traditions. It encourages us to look for nutritious foods [in many forms](#) and to be attuned to the effects of food marketing.

It shows us that healthy diets can, and should, be achievable for everyone.

Science took centre stage

The process to design the new Canada's Food Guide was a collective one. It was based on science, an evolutionary [enterprise](#) that is never about one scientist or one study.

For the first time [in the history](#) of the guide, Health Canada required stakeholders from the food and beverage industry to share the [same public platform](#) for offering input as any other citizen, despite pressures [to circumvent the consultation process](#).

Throughout the process, Canadians had access [to the science](#) behind the recommendations and to the [list of meetings](#) held during the guide's development.

Canada's place in the world was part of the new guide's creation. For the first time, the food guide makes a direct connection between individual diets and the health and sustainability of our planet.

Food sustainability researchers have increasingly agreed that to [feed a](#)

[growing human population while operating within the planet's biophysical boundaries](#), we will need to shift towards a more plant-based diet. The guide empowers us to chart a course towards sustainability, since high-income nations like Canada where meat and dairy are consumed in large amounts are best positioned for positive dietary change.

Structural disparities in nutrition

Since its release, [some observers](#) have pointed out that socio-economic inequities could make it difficult for some to follow guide's recommendations. But this isn't a critique of the actual guide.

Rather, we argue that Canada's Food Guide is a bold and positive step forward in supporting health equity. The new guide has shown where the gaps in our environments and institutions lie, as healthy public policy should. It makes the structural disparities in nutrition in Canada obvious.

If filling a plate with wholesome, healthy, fresh foods looks like a luxury, it's not the Food Guide that makes it so. We shouldn't accept that healthy foods aren't attainable or desirable for some socio-economic groups.

If choosing to drink lots of water feels impossible, it's because many Indigenous peoples who live in small, remote, isolated northern communities [still face a crisis](#) in access to safe drinking water.

If plant-based proteins seem out of the ordinary, it's because [average annual household grocery spending](#) on meat is still 1.5 times greater than spending on vegetables.

If having time to shop and cook sounds unrealistic, it's because we've designed our communities so that car travel creates [more chances to](#)

[access healthy foods](#) than other commuting methods.

If eating a meal with others seems quaint, it's because precarious work has reduced our opportunities to socially connect, to the [detriment of our health](#).

If planning what to eat seems burdensome, it is because being [gainfully employed](#) still isn't enough to prevent food insecurity in Canada. And despite having skills in the kitchen that are [the same as those who don't struggle to put food on the table](#), Canadians in food-insecure households still [struggle to feed themselves and their families](#).

We're in this together

Healthy public policy means fitting the pieces together. The United Nations declared 2016-2025 a [Decade of Action on Nutrition](#), a platform for aligning the actions of the diverse players who have an influence on what and how we eat. Canada's Food Guide can do the same.

The new guide set us up with a simple and clear way to use all of the most convincing evidence from nutrition science in our everyday lives. At the same time, it is a catalyst for [health practitioners and decision-makers](#) to target the elimination of physical, economic and social barriers to healthy eating.

Canada's Food Guide holds up an uncomfortable mirror for us to acknowledge the social structures that make achieving [healthy eating](#) difficult. It lays out a practical vision and goals, so that as families, schools, workplaces and communities, we can now work together to bring those recommendations to life.

Individual dietary choices are important. But we don't want to live in a

society where our individual choices don't matter to each other. We want a Canada where our [food](#) choices, together, can create better chances for everyone.

The [food guide](#) provides the ingredients for healthier diets. Now it's our job to ensure the plate is accessible and affordable for all.

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