Food system improvements could make it easier to eat healthier

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A science advisory from the American Heart Association describes system-wide innovations to the U.S. food system that are sustainable and have the potential to make it easier for consumers to choose healthy

foods. The advisory is published in the American Heart Association journal *Circulation*.

"Innovation in the food system is needed at multiple levels- the food industry, agricultural industry, public health and medicine, policy, and among communities, worksites, schools, and families. In a healthy food system, the healthy choice would be the default choice," said Cheryl A.M. Anderson, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.S., the chair of the writing group for the advisory.

"To create a healthier and sustainable food system and optimal environments where consumers purchase and consume foods, we need improvements in food production and distribution so that consumers have a wide variety of healthy foods readily available," said Anderson.

According to the advisory, voluntary private sector approaches, when practiced widely, can also favorably impact health behaviors. "Examples include formulating new food products that are lower in calories and/or packaged as smaller serving sizes to reduce population-wide calorie consumption; improving the nutritional value of manufactured foods, product placement of healthier foods on grocery store shelves and pricing strategies to encourage purchasing healthier foods," said Anderson, who is the chair of the American Heart Association's Nutrition Committee and a professor in the school of medicine at the University of California in San Diego.

A few studies have shown positive changes in eating patterns and food selection when community-based approaches are initiated. For example, community organizations and school districts have implemented systems such as such labelling foods with "traffic lights" to indicate healthier foods. Some schools have data showing that students drink more water at school when it is readily available.

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a healthy eating pattern is at the core of a healthy lifestyle that can significantly reduce the risk of heart attacks, heart failure and the most common type of strokes and enhance overall well-being and brain health. It should emphasize vegetables, fruits and whole grains; include low-fat dairy products, poultry, fish, legumes, non-tropical vegetable oils and nuts; and limit intake of sweets, sugary drinks and red meat. However, adherence to healthy dietary patterns needs to be improved for most Americans.

"There is a need for immediate action to promote, fund and evaluate healthful changes to the food system. Innovation at multiple levels is necessary to see improvements in the public's health," said Anderson.

This paper lays the groundwork for continued innovative thinking about a strategic policy agenda that supports an equitable, sustainable [food system](#) that provides healthy, affordable [food](#) for all. It does not reflect the American Heart Association's entire strategic policy agenda nor work that is happening at all levels of government. The American Heart Association will continue to draw upon this scientific advisory and other association policy positions and statements to pursue a comprehensive public advocacy approach to nutrition policy.

Provided by American Heart Association