



**TOWARD AN
INTEGRATED
HEALTH AND
AGRI-FOOD
STRATEGY**



The Strategy



Health is a growing concern in Canada. Obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases are approaching epidemic proportions. Food choices play a big role in our health. Nutrition experts recommend a balanced diet that includes fresh fruits, vegetables, grains and meats. But people often consume foods heavy in salt, sugar, and fats.

The price of poor health is staggering. In the past 20 years, health care costs in Canada have steadily risen. Between 1975 and 2005, per capita health expenditures more than doubled. Poor dietary choices and inactivity can lead to poor health.

The agri-food industry can help. The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute (CAPI) recognizes that the agri-food industry impacts greatly on the health of Canadians. Now, CAPI is launching a project to stimulate the development of an integrated health and agri-food strategy for Canada. An integrated strategy could help improve our health, and contain health care costs. But it will only succeed if industry, governments, and the health care community work together.



Essential Ingredients

To start this project, CAPI completed an exhaustive study on health and food. CAPI retained a project team of experts in agriculture, health care, and nutrition. The team researched examples of integrated strategies around the world, and concluded that an integrated strategy should contain five essential ingredients:

- **Strategic collaboration:** An integrated strategy requires collaboration among stakeholders in agriculture, food, and health, including governments, industry, and health organizations.
- **Research and innovation:** Multi-disciplinary research is needed to foster the development of innovative, healthy products for market.
- **Regulatory and economic framework:** A clear set of regulations, guidelines and incentives are needed that support the objectives of an integrated strategy.
- **Population health and education:** Outreach campaigns will convince governments, politicians, industry, and the public of the benefits of healthy food consumption.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** An independent body of experts should be devised to assess the impacts of an integrated strategy.

The team published its findings in a report called *Finding Common Ground: Food for a Healthy Population and a Healthy Agri-Food Sector*.

The report was sponsored by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Health Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors, Dietitians of Canada, and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.



The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute

CAPI is a non-profit corporation that provides an independent voice on agri-food issues. CAPI's objective is to identify initiatives that could provide Canadians with improved health benefits, while contributing to the economic well-being of the agricultural and food sector. An integrated strategy could have the dual benefit of improving our health and containing health care costs.

The Benefits



An integrated strategy will improve our health. By eating more of the right foods — including many homegrown Canadian products — people stand to make great gains in combating obesity and disease, and to enjoy a more fulfilling lifestyle.

An integrated strategy will also generate economic opportunities. Promoting healthier eating can lead to the development of new products and expanded markets for many farm commodity groups in Canada. For example:

- Research has shown that flax can help lower the risk of heart disease, and prevent some forms of cancer and diabetes;
- Dairy products have been shown to influence bone health, cardiovascular health, and play a role in cancer prevention;
- Canola is an increasingly valued commodity as a vegetable oil, which can help reduce obesity and heart disease.

An integrated strategy might compel governments and industry in Canada to adopt common objectives for healthy eating, and ways to achieve these goals.

Examples Abroad

Internationally, several nations have taken steps to integrate health and food. These examples point the way:

- In Finland, health agencies worked with the food industry to alter the food supply. During the 1970s-1990s, vegetable and fish consumption rose substantially, while the consumption of saturated fat declined. Mortalities from coronary heart disease plummeted. Dietary guidelines were developed for schools, which became a template for guidelines at other institutions, such as day cares, elderly homes, and military facilities.
- In Germany, the government signed an international declaration in 2007 aimed at improving its citizens' physical activity, increasing their consumption of fruits and vegetables, and bringing healthier meals to schools, cafeterias, and retirement homes. The declaration is intended to fight obesity, establish healthy lifestyles, and educate people about the importance of nutrition and exercise.



- In the US, the federal government is leading a project called Healthy People 2010, which is aimed at reducing obesity and encouraging people to maintain a healthy body weight, increase their consumption of fruits, vegetables, and grains, and reduce their fat intake. The project has a strong educational component; the food industry is being encouraged to provide nutritional information in supermarkets, fast-food outlets, and restaurants, while nutrition education programs are being developed in schools.



What Next?

CAPI is developing a framing paper to lead the way toward an integrated health and agri-food strategy. The paper will build on previous efforts in Canada to promote the integration of human health and food. It will be based on the *Finding Common Ground* report and a thorough review of existing policies concerning public health, agriculture and the agri-food industry.

Increasingly, nations and businesses around the world are recognizing the relationship between health and food. CAPI hopes to nurture this trend in Canada. The agriculture and agri-food industry have a huge role to play in population health. The CAPI framing paper will set out a road map to health and agri-food integration, leading to a healthier population and a diverse agri-food industry. Nutrition and food safety must become essential ingredients of the country's health strategies. Eating right: it's our choice.



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