Given the worldwide attention to the dramatic increases in overweight and obesity, this special supplement on healthy eating comes at a very opportune time. Healthy eating not only plays a role in the prevention and control of chronic disease but is also a key determinant of human health and development throughout the life course. A comprehensive research agenda on healthy eating and mechanisms to facilitate collaborative problem solving across disciplines and sectors are urgently needed in Canada to advance our knowledge base on the determinants of healthy eating. While the focus has largely been at the individual level (e.g., knowledge of Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating), we need also to further understand the social, cultural and environmental determinants of healthy eating that operate at the community/neighbourhood, regional, national/provincial/territorial levels and in whole societies. These include, for example, the impact of globalization and how it affects our food supply, and barriers to accessing affordable and personally acceptable food. This evidence base is also needed to inform the policies and programs that have a significant effect on the health and lives of all Canadians, regardless of their income, education or ethnicity, or of the places in which they work, live, play and learn.

The Institute of Population and Public Health (IPPH) of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) supports research to further our understanding of the determinants of human health at the individual and population levels on the basis of the bio-psycho-social factors that influence health and well-being over the life course. As the pre-eminent epidemiologist of our time, Geoffrey Rose, pointed out some 15 years ago, it is only by directly understanding and tackling the “upstream forces” that are shifting entire populations’ distributions of risk factors in an unfavourable way that we can expect to make a significant impact on these health problems, through a strengthened public health infrastructure working in concert with other sectors. IPPH is most concerned with population-level and community-level intervention research to understand and effectively address the underlying drivers affecting the health of populations.

The CIHR Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes (INMD) has identified obesity and maintenance of healthy body weight as its number one strategic priority. Obesity and overweight have been called the fastest growing epidemic of our time, but the good news is that they are potentially reversible. Many levels of government and non-governmental organizations, such as the Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance of Canada, have called for multi-sectoral approaches to combat this significant health problem, its underlying risk factors and their determinants. However, in some instances, the evidence base for intervention effectiveness is weak. In other words, we cannot yet point to a menu of proven, cost-effective policy and program interventions that can be readily implemented in the Canadian context to change or modify the socio-cultural and environmental factors that truly influence this critical aspect of our health. At the core of this challenge is the need to understand the relative contribution of unhealthy eating habits versus that of other risk factors, such as physical inactivity, and, more important, which strategic mix of interventions can make a difference to preventing and controlling overweight, as well as other common risk factors for chronic diseases. In collaboration with partners, including the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, the Canadian Diabetes Association, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada, INMD is increasing our capacity and seeking solutions to this complex problem.

In summary, the insights gained from this supplement are intended to contribute towards advancing a relevant research agenda on healthy eating, a key foundation to support evidence-based community programs and healthy public policies. CIHR looks forward to continuing our work with Health Canada’s Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion, the new Public Health Agency of Canada, and other key actors, towards this end.

REFERENCES


1. Scientific Director, Institute of Population and Public Health
2. Scientific Director, Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes
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