

The Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition (CCFN) was created out of a union of the mandates of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) and the Canadian Food Information Council (CFIC) in 2004.

Vision

To be a catalyst in advancing the nutritional health and well-being of Canadians by acting as Canada's multi-sectoral trusted voice for evidence-based food and nutrition policy.

Mission

To champion evidence-based solutions to key nutrition issues, advocate for evidence-based nutrition policy and promote public understanding of food and nutrition.

Operating Principles

To be proactive, inclusive, open and transparent in:

- Advocating for key emerging and CCFN strategic issues in food and nutrition,
- Fostering relevant partnerships with other food, health and nutrition organizations,
- Communicating between public and private sector partners and key stakeholders, and
- Re-evaluating goals and objectives, key measurable and annual tactics for established strategic areas for the strategic priorities.

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To Order the Ethnographic Survey Report:

Copies of this Ethnographic Survey can be purchased from CCFN.

Obtain your order form from this link and follow the instructions: www.ccfm.ca/in_action/trends.asp

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Background

The Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition (CCFN) launched their first ever Ethnographic¹ Survey Results on October 22, 2010. The findings provided an intriguing show-and-tell of what consumers do regarding food and eating in their homes. Survey participants were asked to complete several activities around food, eating and grocery shopping including a 4-day food record and a number of photo essays (describing a family meal and solo meal).

CCFN then commissioned a panel of dietitians to do a qualitative review of the 4-day food records and photo essays of the family meal and solo meal completed by the 30 study participants (18 English, 12 French), aged 18 to 65 who were responsible or co-responsible for the grocery shopping in their household.

CCFN acknowledges the sample size was small and not generalizable to the Canadian population at large, but it does provide some insights that raise questions for further study.

Key Thematic Findings

The initial review of the findings focused on the Four Food Groups as specified in Canada's Food Guide. Following that, 'other foods' and formats of food products consumed were examined.

Vegetables and Fruit

Canada's Food Guide recommends 7 to 10 servings per day of Vegetables and Fruit for adults with the additional recommendation to eat at least one green and one orange vegetable per day.

The consumption of vegetables and fruit for study participants was well below this recommendation with participants reporting a range of intake of 1 to 5 servings per day. The most commonly listed vegetable choices were potatoes, salad and corn. Fresh fruit chosen was seasonal and most often consumed as a snack or a dessert.

Grain Products

The Food Guide recommends 7-10 servings per day of Grain Products for adults and making at least half of your grain products whole grain each day.

¹ The ethnographic approach used in the study is an evidence-based research strategy where the researchers observed how people eat, drink and choose food and beverages. The observation was facilitated by an online platform where participants provided pictures and descriptions in their own words in response to a series of daily-life tasks.

Review of the participants' food records indicated that consumption of grain products was low and intake of whole grains was very low or non-existent. Whole grain breads seemed to be used by some but that was the only whole grain product mentioned.

Milk and Alternatives

Canada's Food Guide recommends 2 servings per day of Milk and Alternatives for adults and 500 mL (2 cups) of milk every day for adequate vitamin D.

Few of the study participants were found to be meeting the minimum recommendations for milk products especially fluid milk. The food choices in this category were mostly in the form of cheese and yogurt.

Meat and Alternatives

Canada's Food Guide recommends 2 servings per day of Meat and Alternatives for adults and inclusion of meat alternatives, at least two Food Guide Servings of fish each week, as well as lean meat and alternatives with little or no added fat or salt.

The comments provided on foods in this food group only focussed on processed meat and meat alternatives. Processed meats- sausages, deli ham, and bacon- appeared frequently in the food records. The dietitians also commented that very few meat alternatives, such as beans and legumes were consumed. In addition, possibly due to the time of year, it was mentioned that there was a high frequency of barbeque cooking though the type of foods being prepared were not provided.

The consumption patterns reported from this group were not consistent with Canada's Food Guide recommendations

Other Foods

Overall, participants consumed high amounts of sugar-sweetened beverages, fruit flavoured beverages and sodas. These beverages were commonly consumed at meals and snacks. It was not clear if the fruit flavoured beverages were 100% juice.

Of interest, the dietitians reported that those who chose diet soda tended to have better food choices reflected in their 4-day food records.

Desserts chosen tended to be high fat choices including ice cream, pastries, commercial cakes, cookies and desserts.

Solo Meals

When the participants ate on their own, the dietitians reported that the food choices were poorer than when they ate as a family. More convenience type foods and fewer Food Group choices were consumed during solo meals. These meals were regularly eaten in front of the TV or at work or restaurants.

Types of Food Products/Eating Out

The food records included many packaged, processed, convenience foods. Eating out at restaurants, fast food establishments and takeout was common for about half of the participants for at least one meal a day.

Conclusions

Based on the food records and the dietitians observations there appears to be potentially a large gap between the food guide recommendations and what people are actually eating.

A food diary can be a valuable tool for helping Canadians improve their eating habits, as it facilitates the first necessary step: raising awareness of what someone is currently eating. The next step would be to inspire or motivate individuals to improve eating habits and then to provide them with information, tools and resources on food and nutrition. Developing their skills for preparing healthy meals may be one way to assist Canadians to eat better. Learning how to make healthier selections when dining out might also be of great benefit, since according to Statistics Canada, almost 25% of Canadian household food dollars are spent in restaurants.

Implications for Further Research

This survey provided much insight into what a small sample of the population is doing in regard to food choices and eating in their homes. The inclusion of photos reveals what is actually occurring and raises questions about other research results.²

It would be beneficial to expand the research to a larger sample and to explore some additional questions such as:

- ▶ Do people who prepare meals ‘from scratch’ eat healthier than people who use mostly convenience foods?
- ▶ Do people who eat out often do poorer in terms of meeting Food Guide recommendations than those who consume most of their meals at home?
- ▶ Does your ‘stage of life’ influence your eating habits? For example, do young families eat better than singles or empty nesters?

² As reported in the CCFN’s Ethnographic Survey. “Canadians may **believe** that they eat nutritiously: Self-rated knowledge in TNT 2008 indicated that 78% believed themselves to be very or somewhat knowledgeable about nutrition. Yet the preponderance of skipped meals, rushed meals, and meals without fresh fruits or vegetables; the expansive consumption of soft drinks; the excessive intake of caffeine, and the lack of portion control seen in the ethnographic study suggest otherwise. As one participant noted: “I thought I ate pretty good until this week.”