

Letters to the Editor

Food guides

A compromise solution

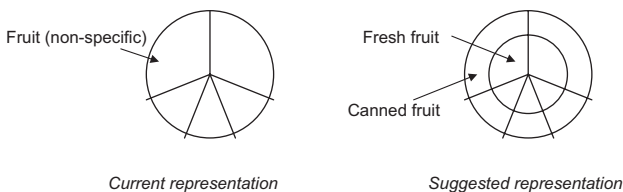
Madam

Carlos Monteiro's commentary⁽¹⁾ linking food guidance with food processing has special relevance for current public health nutrition challenges. As he explains, the degree of processing correlates with the amount of fat, salt and sugar added to foods, and the subsequent likelihood of dietary imbalances.

Also, processing can be a proxy for the relative environmental footprint of a food. As the degree of food processing increases, often so too does the requirement for energy inputs – directly in the processing itself and indirectly in packaging. Yet current food guides often are restricted simply to translating abstract nutrient recommendations into food serving (amount and variety) guidance.

Carlos Monteiro comments that his approach, which frames food guidance around the degree of processing, 'implies systematic revision of current official and authoritative dietary guidelines and graphic guides to food, nutrition and health.' Indeed. A suggestion for food guidance revision to capture degree of food processing, which also retains a conventional nutrient basis, follows. The key requirement is that the visual representation needs to be a shape that will enable the graphic to depict two distinct dimensions. The first dimension would, as now, portray the nutrient basis to food guidance – foods grouped in accordance to similar nutrient profiles, with recommendations for serving size, number and variety from each food group. The second dimension would provide an indication of the degree of food processing.

Thus, the plate shapes of the UK food guide⁽²⁾ and the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating⁽³⁾ could be adapted by overlaying an inner second circle (see figure below). Within the inner circle would be positioned minimally processed 'group 1' foods, for example fresh fruit. In the outer circle would be located the more highly processed 'group 2' foods that might still contribute the characteristic nutrients of a particular food group, for example canned fruit in syrup. External to the plate would be the 'ultra-processed' 'group 3'



Integrating a food processing dimension into a nutrient-based food guide

foods, indicating they make no contribution to a nutritious diet, for example fruit cordials containing minimal fruit.

This suggested guide has a number of advantages. It integrates nutrient and food processing considerations. It encourages people to discriminate on nutrition and environmental criteria by preferring food choices from the inner circle. Also, it could be used to set targets for changing dietary behaviour, by promoting an incremental shift in specific food choices within any food group from the outer circle to the inner circle of the plate.

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3. Australia Government, Department of Health and Ageing (2008) Australian Guide to Healthy Eating. <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-publhlth-strateg-food-guide-index.htm> (accessed May 2009).

Obesity prevention in France

Yes, but how and why?

Madam

The report by Romon et al. describing a community-wide, multi-faceted intervention to prevent childhood overweight and obesity in France⁽¹⁾ asserts a substantial reduction over time in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the intervention communities relative to two smaller comparison communities.

This novel approach to childhood obesity has been adopted by other European countries⁽²⁾ and will soon be implemented in South Australia⁽³⁾. It has been cited as a model for community-based solutions to obesity⁽⁴⁾. Reactions to this study have implications for public health worldwide.

We do not question the need for multi-level, multi-sector solutions to childhood obesity. We are, however, concerned about uncritical acceptance of the merits of this study, especially as the authors did not describe important elements of the intervention and its evaluation.

An intervention programme is a representation of a theoretical link between the known or perceived