

**CMA's Presentation to the House of Commons
Standing Committee on Health**

Healthy Living

Presented by:

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Check against delivery

A healthy population and a vibrant medical profession
Une population en santé et une profession médicale
dynamique

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) is the national voice of Canadian physicians. Founded in 1867, CMA's mission is to serve and unite the physicians of Canada and be the national advocate, in partnership with the people of Canada, for the highest standards of health and health care.

The CMA is a voluntary professional organization representing over 74,000 of Canada's physicians and uniting at the national level the voices of 12 provincial and territorial medical associations.



I would like to thank the Committee for inviting the Canadian Medical Association to appear on this very important topic.

As a family physician in Saskatoon and the past president of the CMA, I can assure you that Canada's physicians have an acute interest in drawing attention to the health consequences of poor nutrition and lack of physical activity, and the challenge of obesity.

We know that obesity is a contributor to a number of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and liver disease, as well as breast, colon and prostate cancer.

We know that over-consumption of salt, sugars, and saturated and trans fats can be a factor in hypertension, cardiovascular disease and stroke, and kidney disease.

And we know that Canadians have become dramatically less physically fit in recent decades.

As a country, we need to espouse a culture of health and wellness, based on good nutrition and physical activity.

Finding solutions will require a collaborative, system-wide approach involving all levels of government, the health, education, industry, finance and transportation ministries, and the private sector.

We know that if provided with support when young, children can adopt healthy life styles. That is why the CMA continues to call on governments across the country to work with school boards to:

- provide at least 30 minutes of active daily physical education for all primary and secondary grades, given by trained educators in the field;
- provide access to attractive, affordable, healthy food choices and clearly post the nutrition content of the foods they sell; and
- ban junk food sales in all primary, intermediate and secondary schools in Canada.

The CMA has advocated policies and regulations for food safety, and promoted healthy eating and physical activity as key components of healthy living and the prevention of disease.

The CMA policy statement *Promoting Physical Activity and Healthy Weights* calls for a Canada-wide strategy for healthy living that includes:

- information and support for Canadians to help them make healthy choices;
- support for health professionals in counselling patients on healthy weight and in treating existing obesity;
- community infrastructure that makes healthy living choices easier; and
- public policies that encourage healthy eating and physical activity.

All Canadians need access to nutritious food at affordable prices. The price of milk, produce and other healthy foods varies greatly in different parts of Canada. In remote areas, they are even more expensive because of high transportation costs. In urban areas, nutritious food may be unaffordable for people on low incomes and unavailable as grocery stores move to the suburbs thus creating “food deserts”. Among other strategies, governments should consider: implementing school meal programs; and taking into account the cost of nutritious food when setting social assistance rates.

The proliferation of packaged, prepared foods and fast foods has contributed to excess amounts of salt, sugar, saturated and trans fat and calories in our diet.

While we welcome the federal government’s support for the reduction of trans fats and sodium levels in processed foods, reliance on the food industry to voluntarily reduce these ingredients has not been successful. We believe that regulation is needed to safeguard the health of Canadians.

Healthy living begins with an awareness of the impact of food and exercise on health. While individuals must take responsibility for making healthy choices, the CMA believes that governments have an obligation to provide guidance on healthy eating and physical activity that can be easily incorporated into daily lives.

We commend the federal and provincial/ territorial governments for their recent Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights. Physicians were also pleased to see the revised Canada’s Food Guide in 2007, and the recent update to Canada’s Physical Activity Guide.

The CMA supports nutrition and caloric labeling on packaged foods to help Canadians make informed food choices. The federal nutrition labeling awareness initiative is useful to consumers but we think information can be simplified. For example, the UK is testing front of pack ‘traffic light’ coding for fats, salt, sugar and calories. The CMA has also called for a clear display of caloric counts, and sodium, trans-fats and protein levels on restaurant and cafeteria menus.

The CMA believes encouragement of active transportation, that is walking and cycling, is a way to increase physical activity. Communities need to make it easier for Canadians to be physically active in their day-to-day life by providing sidewalks and pedestrian-friendly intersections; bike lanes, paths and parking spaces; and trails, parks and green spaces.

One area that we believe warrants further study is the use of incentives to promote healthy behaviours. By transferring funds or other benefits to an individual, incentives provide immediate rewards for behaviours that can lead to long-term health gains. An example in Canada is the Children's Fitness Tax Credit, which is intended to help children be more active by offsetting some of the costs incurred by families for sports and leisure programs.

Government disincentives largely involve the use of regulation and taxation in order to change individual behaviour. This helps to create an environment in which healthy choices are easier to make.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of nutrition and physical activity to our health. Encouraging Canadians to make healthy choices requires a wide ranging, long-term and collaborative approach.

The CMA believes this challenge should be met urgently. Canada's physicians are more than ready to work with governments to ensure that Canadians can improve and maintain their health.