



Building healthier, more equitable and sustainable food systems for Australia



Key messages

- Unhealthy diets are now the leading preventable risk factor contributing to the burden of disease globally and in Australia. Current food environments and policies do not support healthy eating despite strong evidence that healthy diets prevent the advent of chronic disease.
- This project aimed to learn how to influence nutrition policy most effectively, and ensure governments implement evidence-based actions in the face of competing interests.
- We assessed current food environments in participating jurisdictions; examined how implementing priority policy actions could be better supported and by which actors; and collaborated with key stakeholders to develop, implement, and evaluate specific demonstration projects.
- We developed Australia's first Food Environment Dashboard that provides the best available data on all aspects of Australia's food environments for those interested in understanding ways to improve population diets and to inform policy makers at all levels of government.
- We produced evidence demonstrating that healthy, environmentally sustainable diets can be less expensive than the current Australian diet, although they are still unaffordable for low-income groups, particularly for those living in remote areas of Australia.
- We modified existing protocols for assessing diet costs and affordability for use with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and low socioeconomic groups.
- We outlined several ways to ensure that governments are well placed to implement policies to support improved population diets.
- This research provides policy makers, key actors and the public with evidence-based nutrition policy actions that could facilitate Australia's transition to nutritious, equitable and sustainable food systems.

The project: Supporting priority actions in the food and nutrition system

Project lead: Professor Amanda Lee, University of Queensland; Professor Sharon Friel, Australian National University; Professor Anna Peeters, Deakin University; Associate Professor Gary Sacks, Deakin University

Project start: May 2018 **Project end:** December 2021

Why is this issue important?

Unhealthy diet is the leading preventable risk factor contributing to the burden of disease globally and in Australia.^{1,2} It is a major contributor to the more than \$50 billion estimated in annual health care costs and lost productivity from overweight and obesity in Australia.³

Fewer than 4% of Australians eat diets recommended by the Australian Dietary Guidelines⁴, and more than 35% of the energy intake of adults comes from discretionary food and drinks (those not required for health that are high in added sugar, saturated fat, salt and/or alcohol).⁵

In addition, dietary risks are not distributed equally, groups who experience greater social disadvantage have poorer diets, and suffer increased risk of malnutrition, obesity and diet-related chronic disease.⁶

We know that poor diets are driven by current food environments, such as Australian supermarkets that heavily promote unhealthy food and beverages in-store, and policies which do not support healthy eating.⁷ We need to understand how to better influence nutrition policy and ensure that governments implement effective actions in the face of competing interests with various levels of power and influence on the food system.⁸

Unhealthy
food environments
are the
main drivers
of poor diets in
Australia and
around the world



What did we do?

In early 2018, Professor Amanda Lee from University of Queensland, Professor Sharon Friel from Australian National University, and Professor Anna Peeters and Associate Professor Gary Sacks from Deakin University were brought together as the project's lead investigators to help tackle the issue of poor diet as the leading preventable risk factor contributing to the burden of disease in Australia and globally.

Building on previous Prevention Centre research, this project focused on identifying the influences on nutrition policies and actions to better understand the key leverage points for intervention in the food system. The project team used a range of approaches including regulatory and policy science, behavioural economics and systems mapping to support stakeholders to improve implementation of evidence-based interventions.

The project assessed current food environments in each jurisdiction; examined how implementation of priority policy actions could be better supported and by which actors; and collaborated with stakeholders and key actors to develop, implement and evaluate specific demonstration projects at multiple levels, including a local level collaboration with the YMCA that produced the first multi-site evaluation of changes to healthier food and drink provision.

Broader representation was also sought from academics, public health, government and industry to build capacity to monitor, assess, benchmark, understand and improve food environments in Australia.

The project's 'soft edges' allowed freedom for capacity building and to respond opportunistically to emerging priorities. Such flexibility allowed us to pivot and look at new and emerging issues, including the impact of COVID-19, which highlighted inadequacies in welfare policy settings in Australia, and the ongoing impact of food insecurity.



- ? How healthy are Australia's food environments?
- ? How much does a healthy diet cost for a family?
- ? How much exposure do our children have to marketing of unhealthy foods?

What did we find?

We found it is possible to influence nutrition policy more effectively, and ensure governments implement evidence-based actions in the face of competing interests.

In the area of policy and regulation, the use of different disciplinary methodologies supported research that is highly policy-relevant and targeted at decision makers. Such evidence-based research supports a moral and business case for greater public health action.

New evidence using the Healthy Diets ASAP method demonstrates that healthy, sustainable diets can be less expensive than the current Australian diet, although they are still unaffordable for low-income groups, particularly for those living in remote areas of Australia.

Despite rising food costs during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research found that welfare benefits provided by the Australian Government improved affordability of recommended diets and, for the first time, welfare dependent families had economic access to recommended diets. This improvement in affordability of the recommended diet highlights the need to permanently increase welfare support for low-income families to ensure food security.

Our observational study, conducted as part of this project, evaluated the introduction of a healthy food and drink policy in 13 community recreation centres and found such a policy can shift people purchases towards healthier choices and without a decline in food sales. A decline in drink sales indicated the need for more research in this area to understand the best ways to ensure such policies are economically viable.

The development of Australia's first Food Environment Dashboard clearly outlines the different ways that the environment drives us to consume too much of the wrong types of foods. It shows the need for stronger policy action to create healthier food environments from all levels of government in Australia.



What did we produce?

This MRFF-funded research project produced more than 35 papers published in peer-reviewed journals. Visit the [project page](#) on our website a complete list of publications.

We also developed a novel suite of decision-making tools and case studies that explicitly address the interests of the diverse range of stakeholders, particularly those outside the health sector, required to implement food and nutrition policy actions:

New evidence on cost of healthy, sustainable diets with Healthy Diets ASAP method

- We modified the Healthy Diets ASAP (Australian Standardised Affordability and Pricing) methods protocols for use with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and low socioeconomic groups to compare the cost of a healthy diet with the current diet in communities and also in different places; and to monitor changes over time. Two images were developed to visualise the difference between an unhealthy diet (current) and healthy (recommended) diet to support health promotion activities and information campaigns. These are available from the [Prevention Centre website](#).

Image assets for health promotion campaigns



Unhealthy (current) Australian diet

Contents of the current (unhealthy) Australian diet (for family of 2 adults and 2 children for a fortnight) as per the Healthy Diets ASAP protocol. This diet provides 33,860kj per day, and is less equitable and less sustainable than the healthy diet.



Healthy (recommended) Australian diet

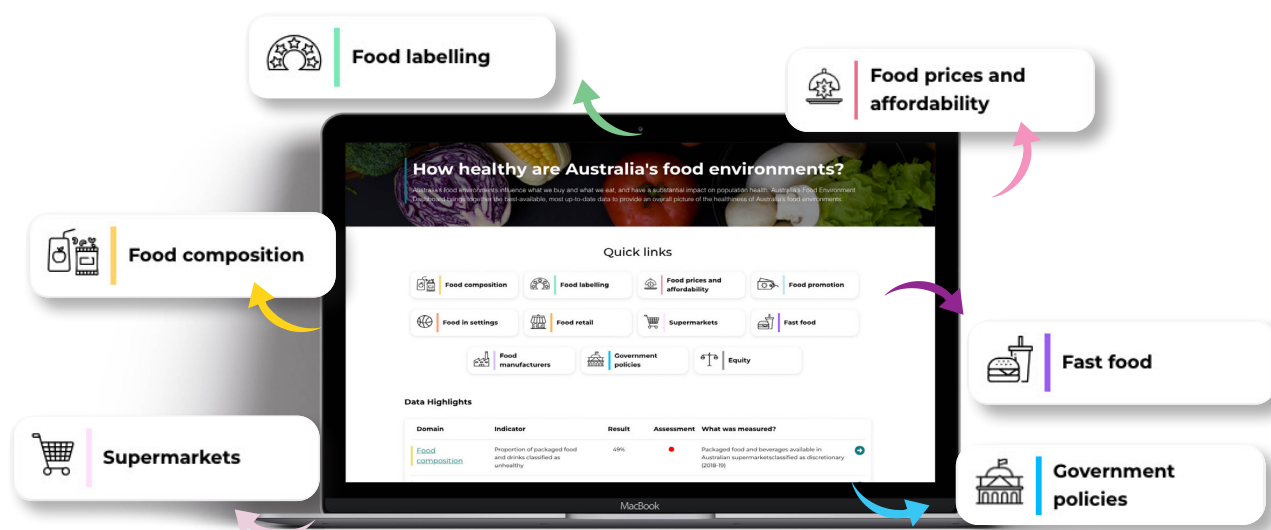
Contents of the healthy (recommended) Australian diet (for family of 2 adults and 2 children for a fortnight) as per the Healthy Diets ASAP protocol. This diet provides 33,610kj per day, and is less equitable and less sustainable than the current diet.

Improved understanding around regulatory governance

- A deeper understanding of the regulatory governance conditions and combinations of conditions that influence the development and implementation of food marketing, labelling, taxation and composition policies. These are the combinations of regulatory governance conditions:
 1. Comprehensive policy monitoring that is independent of the food industry is almost always present when policies succeed.
 2. A combination of minimal industry involvement, government-led policy with mandatory regulation, use of international best practice instrument design, and comprehensive monitoring and enforcement.
 3. A combination of minimal industry involvement, best practice instrument design and comprehensive monitoring.

Australia's Food Environment Dashboard

- The development of [Australia's first Food Environment Dashboard](#) brings together the best available and most up-to-date data on all aspects of Australia's food environments including key indicators of the healthiness of our food supply, and the ways in which foods are labelled, priced and promoted.
- The Dashboard is designed to provide accessible information for anyone interested in understanding ways to improve population diets and will be especially useful for informing policy makers at all levels of government.



Australia's Food Environment Dashboard was a finalist in the Victorian Health Promotion Awards 2021 for 'Leading Health Promotion Research'.

Why does it matter?

This research provides policy makers, key actors and the public with evidence-based nutrition policy actions that could facilitate implementation of both strategies and Australia's transition to nutritious, equitable and environmentally sustainable food systems. This project has created low-cost, translatable and scalable solutions that can benefit communities around the world.

Our findings support urgent policy actions to help build on Aboriginal expert knowledge about food, and shift diets towards the relevant recommendations of the Australian Dietary Guidelines to enjoy traditional foods where possible and choose store foods which are most like traditional foods.

The Food Environment Dashboard demonstrates how environments we live in, and the settings in which we buy our food, shapes our diets. This is the first time such a comprehensive set of data has been collected and presented. It represents a significant step in how we see and understand our food environments with red flags demonstrating an urgent need for governments to introduce higher standards for how the food industry markets and sells its unhealthy food and drink products.

Along with dozens of papers published that demonstrate the value of prevention, this project has helped create capacity for research impact and supported PhD students and early to mid-career researchers.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

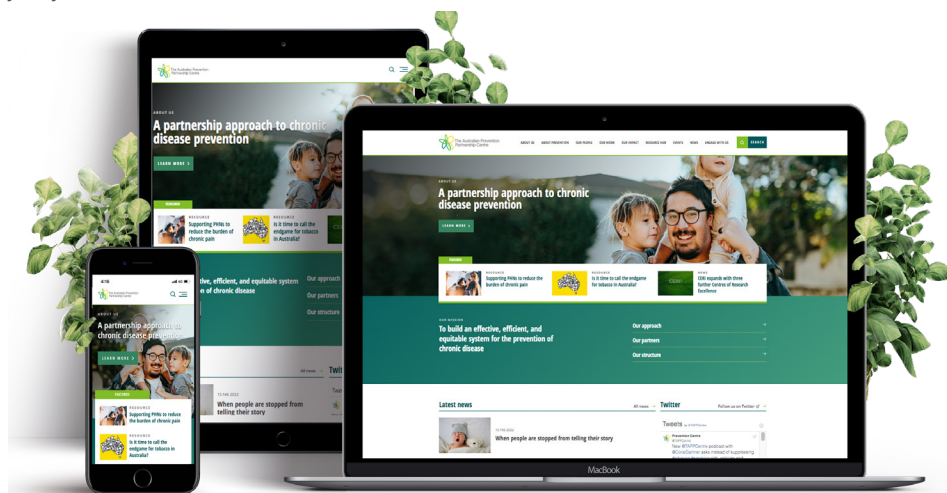
Efforts to mobilise the project's findings and achievements through the Prevention Centre's Coordinating Centre raised the profile of the research and improved the translation of evidence, such as inclusion in the National Obesity Strategy of ongoing GST exemption of basic, healthy foods in Australia. The project also helped secure ongoing funding and enhanced resources for the project's researchers and partners.

Since this research began the Australian Government has delivered two national strategies around prevention, the National Preventive Health Strategy (NPHS) 2021–2030 and National Obesity Strategy 2022–2033. Both strategies list objectives around making changes to the food systems and the environments around us to help Australians live healthier lives for as long as possible. For example, the NPHS details the need for multiple strategies aimed at the individual, communities, the food system and the food environment to achieve the targets in this focus area.

Next steps

The resources, tools and information developed support public health researchers and practitioners to communicate more effectively with policy makers, key actors and the public regarding the actions needed to transition to more nutritious, equitable and sustainable food systems in Australia and globally.

To access more resources around food and nutrition visit the Prevention Centre's website's [Resource Hub](#) and search by keywords.



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The Australian Prevention
Partnership Centre

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