

nutrition in australia:

the challenges, evidence
and opportunities ahead.

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the challenges, evidence and opportunities ahead.

Australia's nutrition challenges are shaped by access, affordability, food literacy and the environments in which people live, learn and work. Improving nutrition requires coordinated action across food literacy, supportive food environments, equitable access and implementation.

the challenges.



4.3%

of Australians met recommended vegetable, legume & bean intake in 2023.¹



31.3%

of Australians' average daily energy intake in 2023 came from discretionary foods.¹



33%

of Australian households experience moderate or severe food insecurity.²



13.1%

of Australia's total disease burden is attributable to overweight (including obesity) & dietary risks.³



\$9.2 bn

in Australian health expenditure is attributable to nutrition-related risk factors.⁴

what is shaping the challenges?



access and affordability.

Cost, availability, geography and socioeconomic circumstances all influence food choices.^{2, 5, 6}



food literacy.

Knowledge and practical food skills help people navigate food choices and put information into practice.^{7, 8}



food environments.

The settings where people live, learn and work shape the food options available to them.^{5, 9}

opportunities for action.

build food literacy.

Strengthen practical food knowledge, confidence and skills across the life course.

create supportive food environments.

Strengthen nutrition standards, food provision and other approaches that make nutritious food more accessible.

turn policy into practice.

Pair policies and programs with workforce capability, practical resources and ongoing implementation support.

strengthen prevention.

Build on Australia's existing policy foundations through sustained action across government, research, public health and community sectors.

prevention can deliver value.

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obesity-prevention interventions examined in an Australian economic evaluation were projected to improve health while generating net savings over the population's lifetime.¹⁰

executive summary.

Australia faces significant nutrition challenges. In 2023, only 4.3% of Australians aged two years and over met recommended vegetable intake, while discretionary foods accounted for nearly one-third of daily energy intake.¹ In 2024, overweight (including obesity) was the leading risk factor contributing to Australia's total disease burden, accounting for 8.3%, while dietary risks accounted for 4.8%.³ Overweight (including obesity) and dietary risks were also attributable to an estimated \$9.2 billion in health expenditure in FY 2023–24.⁴

Improving nutrition requires more than information alone. Food affordability, unequal access, food literacy and the environments in which Australians live, learn and work all influence dietary choices. Addressing these interconnected factors requires approaches that build practical food skills, strengthen supportive food environments and respond to the needs of different communities.

Evidence shows that food literacy education, supportive nutrition policies and practical implementation support can all contribute to improving nutrition behaviours and food environments.^{8, 11–14}

National Nutrition Foundation brings more than 45 years of experience translating nutrition evidence into action through government-funded programs reaching over 3.8 million Australians. Through initiatives, including the Fresh School Nutrition Advisory Program (freshSNAP) and the Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS), National Nutrition Foundation supports schools, early childhood services, health services and other settings to put nutrition guidance into practice.

the state of nutrition in australia.

Good nutrition is fundamental to health, wellbeing and productivity across the life course. Yet despite decades of public health efforts, most Australians are not consuming diets consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2023 National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey reveals significant gaps between recommended and actual usual dietary intake. Among Australians aged two years and over, only:



Discretionary foods, which are generally high in saturated fat, added sugars or salt, accounted for 31.3% of average daily energy intake. While this represents a decline from 35.4% in 2011-12, discretionary food consumption remains a substantial component of Australian diets.¹

National modelling predicts dietary quality will continue to worsen by 2030 without intervention.¹⁵

These dietary patterns have significant implications for Australia's health. Dietary risks are a major modifiable risk factor for chronic conditions, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

The Australian Burden of Disease Study 2024 found that overweight (including obesity) had overtaken tobacco use as the leading risk factor contributing to Australia's total disease burden, accounting for 8.3%. Dietary risks accounted for 4.8% of total disease burden.³ Together, these figures highlight the significant contribution of nutrition-related risk factors to ill health in Australia.

The economic consequences are also substantial. In 2023-24, an estimated \$9.2 billion in Australian health expenditure was attributable to overweight (including obesity) and dietary risks.⁴ This highlights the substantial economic burden associated with nutrition-related risk factors.

Australia's dietary patterns present a significant public health challenge, with implications for health and healthcare expenditure. Addressing this challenge requires looking beyond dietary intake to the broader factors that shape food choices, including affordability, access, practical skills and the environments in which Australians live, learn and work.

the factors shaping australia's nutrition challenges.

Australia's nutrition challenges extend beyond individual food choices. Food affordability, access, practical skills and the environments in which people live, learn and work all influence what Australians can eat. Understanding these factors is essential to identifying opportunities for improvement.

access to nutritious food is not equal.

Food insecurity remains a significant challenge. Foodbank Australia's 2025 Hunger Report estimated that 33% of Australian households, approximately 3.5 million, experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in the preceding 12 months. Of these food-insecure households, 61% were classified as severely food insecure, experiencing substantial disruptions to their food intake, including skipping meals or going entire days without eating. Single-parent households, renters and households including someone with a disability or health issue were disproportionately affected.²

Where people live also influences their access to food. In rural Australia, fresh produce can be more expensive, less available and of poorer quality than in metropolitan areas.¹⁶ Furthermore, a study examining food outlet distribution across Victoria found that more than one-third of regional areas had no supermarket, greengrocer or butcher within 2 km of their geographic centre. The study also identified socioeconomic inequalities in food outlet availability across metropolitan and regional communities.⁵

These barriers are particularly significant for some communities. In 2023, only 63.8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reported that they were always able to access healthy and nutritious foods when they wanted to during the preceding four weeks. This fell to just 40% among those living in remote areas, compared to 68.3% in non-remote areas. Among those who could not always access healthy and nutritious foods, 61.2% identified cost as their main barrier, while 20.3% identified availability.⁶

These findings demonstrate why improving nutrition requires attention to affordability, food availability and the different circumstances of communities across Australia.

food literacy remains under-supported.

Food literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills and behaviours involved in planning and managing food, selecting foods, preparing meals and eating. These capabilities can support people to navigate food choices and put nutrition knowledge into practice.

The latest Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll found that only 37% of teens could correctly identify all five food groups, while 65% said they would like to learn how to cook a basic meal.¹⁷ These findings highlight opportunities to strengthen foundational nutrition knowledge and build on young people's interest in developing practical food skills.

Schools provide an important opportunity to build these capabilities. Food and nutrition education is already reflected in the Australian Curriculum Version 9.0 through the Food and wellbeing Curriculum Connection, particularly across Health and Physical Education and Design and Technologies. However, opportunities to translate this curriculum into consistent learning experiences are not always well supported. Fewer than one-third of Australian primary school teachers surveyed reported having training, funding or school policies to support food and nutrition education.¹⁸ This highlights opportunities to strengthen teacher training, resources and whole-school support for food and nutrition education.

As Australians increasingly encounter nutrition information online, food literacy also involves being able to critically evaluate the information they receive. A 2024 study examining nutrition-related Instagram posts from influential Australian accounts found that 44.7% contained inaccuracies.¹⁹ This highlights the importance of equipping people with the skills to identify credible nutrition information and make informed food choices in an increasingly complex digital environment.

Food literacy is relevant across the life course, from practical food education in schools to community learning opportunities that support adults and families. Strengthening these capabilities complements measures that address the affordability and availability of nutritious food.



connecting knowledge with supportive environments.

Improving nutrition requires more than addressing individual barriers in isolation. Food literacy can equip Australians with the knowledge and skills to make informed food choices, but these capabilities need to be supported by environments that enable nutritious choices.

This is particularly important in settings where people regularly eat, learn, work and spend time. In early childhood education and care, for example, children can consume more than half, and in some cases up to two thirds, of their daily food intake while in care.⁹

This creates an important opportunity for food provision, nutrition standards and education to support positive food experiences and dietary habits from an early age.

Broader policy and environmental levers can also influence the food choices available to people. These include approaches to the marketing and advertising of discretionary foods, fiscal measures such as taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages, nutrition standards and procurement policies, and stronger nutrition policy across public settings.

Bringing these approaches together creates opportunities to support nutrition across schools, early childhood services, workplaces and communities. By connecting education with improvements to food environments and equitable access, Australia can build on existing initiatives to support lasting improvements in nutrition.



why nutrition matters.

nutrition shapes health and wellbeing across the life course.

Nutrition plays an important role at every stage of life, with nutritional needs and priorities changing over time.

During pregnancy and early childhood, adequate nutrition supports growth and development, while early food experiences can influence lifelong eating habits. During the school years, nutrition supports learning and wellbeing, with schools providing opportunities to build practical food skills and positive food experiences.¹¹

In adulthood, nutrition supports health, quality of life and participation in work and community life. As people age, adequate nutrition becomes increasingly important for maintaining independence, preventing malnutrition and supporting quality of life.²⁰

These changing needs highlight the importance of nutrition initiatives across the life course, from early childhood services and schools to workplaces, communities and aged care.²¹

nutrition is an investment in australia's future.

The benefits of improved nutrition extend far beyond health outcomes.

Improved nutrition can deliver benefits across multiple sectors, including:

- Better educational outcomes and learning readiness
- Increased workforce productivity and participation
- Reduced pressure on health services
- Improved community wellbeing and resilience
- Greater health equity across the population

As a result, nutrition should be considered a whole-of-government investment rather than solely a health issue.

australia's policy foundations already exist.

Australia has established a strong policy foundation for improving nutrition outcomes through the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030, the National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032 and the development of a National Food Security Strategy.^{22, 23} Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for improving nutrition, strengthening supportive food environments and addressing health inequities.

Building on these commitments, Australia has an opportunity to embed food literacy, equitable access to nutritious food and measurable nutrition outcomes within coordinated policy action. Sustained investment and implementation will be essential to translating these national ambitions into lasting improvements in nutrition and wellbeing.

nutrition is a global development priority.

Australia's nutrition priorities are consistent with broader international commitments and best-practice guidance. According to the World Health Organization, nutrition contributes directly to Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and is a key enabler of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing).²⁴

The United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition has been extended to 2030, reflecting continued global recognition that nutrition is fundamental to improving health outcomes, reducing inequities and supporting sustainable development.²⁵

Australia's nutrition priorities also align with internationally recognised best practice, including efforts to improve dietary quality, strengthen healthy food environments and support equitable access to nutritious food.



what works: evidence and opportunities for action.

Improving nutrition requires a coordinated approach that combines food literacy education, practical skills and supportive food environments. Evidence from Australian programs and international guidance identifies opportunities to strengthen these approaches across the life course.

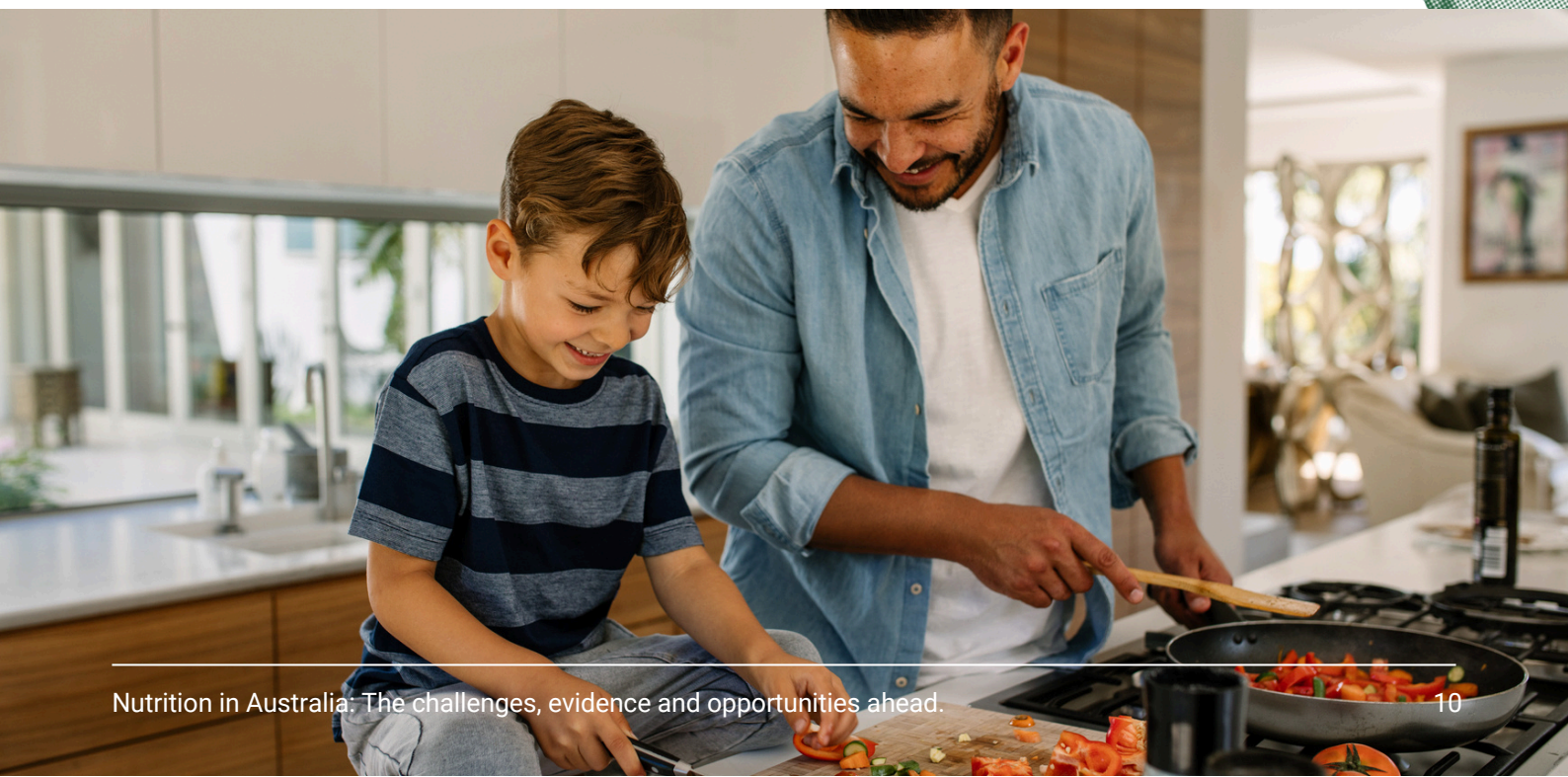
building food literacy across the life course.

Practical food literacy programs can strengthen people's confidence and capabilities in planning, selecting and preparing food.

A 2024 evaluation of a community-based cooking and nutrition program involving 258 Australian adults found significant improvements in nutrition knowledge, cooking confidence and food preparation behaviours. Participants also reported increased fruit and vegetable consumption and improved food security following the program.⁷

Schools provide opportunities to build food literacy from an early age, connecting classroom learning with practical experiences that develop knowledge, confidence and skills. A systematic review of 21 studies found that school-based cooking programs produced small improvements in children's cooking confidence and vegetable intake, with greater effects observed in programs offering more than six hours of cooking activities.⁸

National Nutrition Foundation's freshSNAP program puts this evidence into practice within an Australian context through curriculum-aligned resources, educator development and practical food education. In a recent program evaluation, 94% of participating educators reported improvements in students' food literacy skills, confidence and positive attitudes towards nutritious food.



creating supportive food environments.

Education must be complemented by environments that make nutritious food accessible and available. The World Health Organization recommends nutrition standards and procurement policies across public settings, including schools, childcare centres, hospitals and other institutions.^{11–13}

Effective implementation also requires practical support. An Australian randomised controlled trial found that schools receiving training, resources, feedback and ongoing assistance were more likely to meet canteen policy requirements.¹⁴

In Victoria, National Nutrition Foundation's Healthy Eating Advisory Service has supported public health services to implement the Healthy choices: policy directive. In 2025, all 80 Victorian public health services reported meeting the directive's food and drink requirements, illustrating how mandatory policy, organisational commitment and tailored implementation support can work together to improve food environments.

This approach provides a practical example for strengthening food provision policies and implementation support across education, workplace and community settings.

Together, the evidence highlights the importance of investing not only in nutrition education and policies, but also in the practical support needed to translate them into everyday practice and sustain improvements over time.

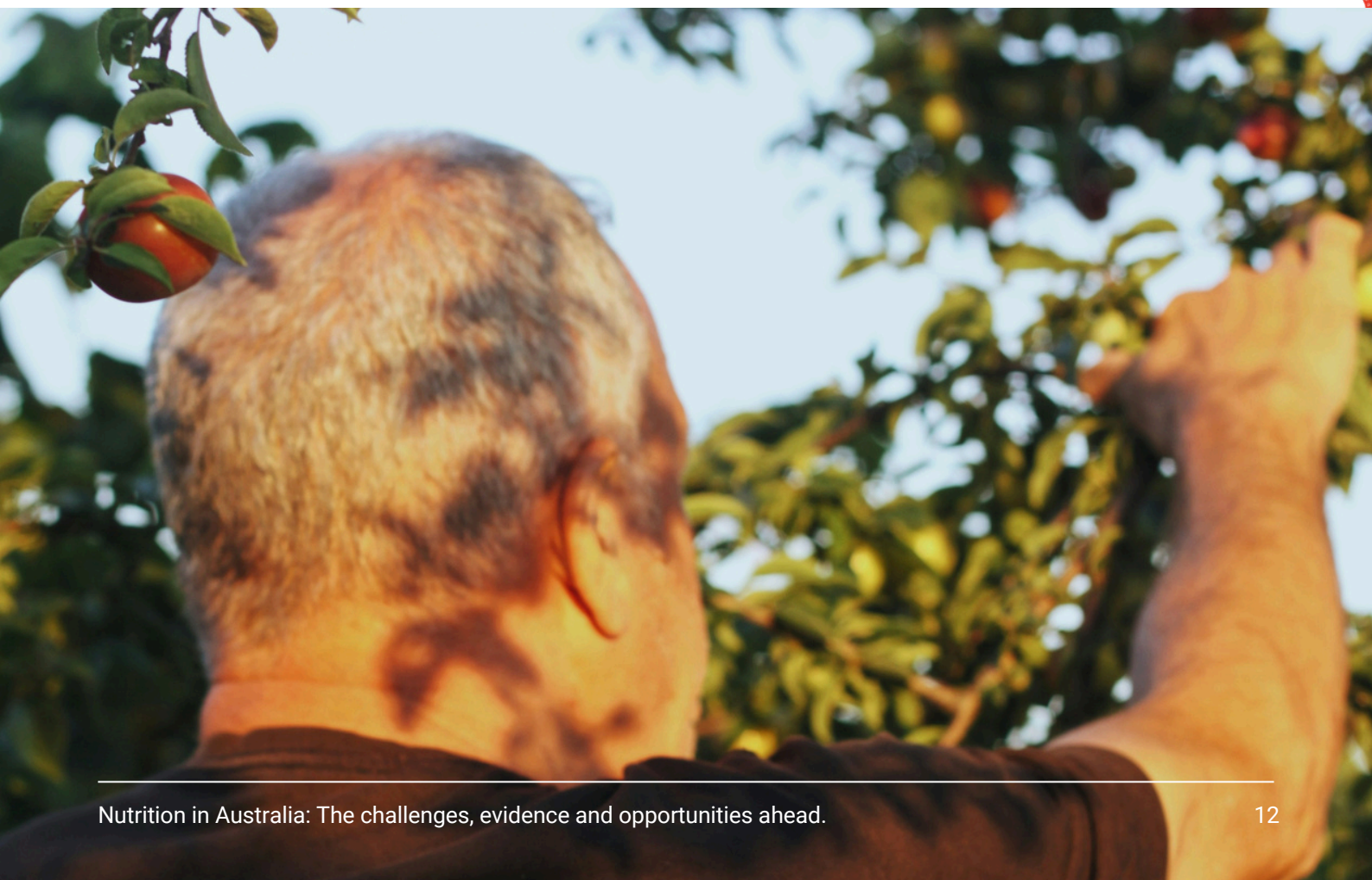
the investment case.

The health and economic burden associated with nutrition-related risk factors strengthens the case for prevention. Australian economic research demonstrates the potential value of prevention. A 2020 evaluation found that 11 of 16 obesity-prevention interventions were projected to improve health while generating net savings over the population's lifetime. While implementation costs are often incurred upfront, healthcare savings can accumulate over time.¹⁰

Australia's National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030 includes a target to increase investment in preventive health to 5% of total health expenditure by 2030.²² This provides an important policy context for considering the role of nutrition in Australia's broader approach to prevention.

Realising the potential benefits of nutrition initiatives requires attention not only to policies and programs, but also to how they are put into practice. Workforce capability, tailored guidance, practical resources and ongoing support can help organisations implement and maintain improvements to food environments.

Through established programs such as the Healthy Eating Advisory Service and freshSNAP, National Nutrition Foundation brings experience in translating nutrition guidance into practice across different settings. This experience can contribute to discussions about implementation needs, opportunities to extend the reach of effective approaches and the importance of evaluating program outcomes and delivery.



call to action.

Australia has established important foundations for improving nutrition. Building on these commitments requires connecting food literacy with supportive food environments, addressing inequities in access and supporting the practical implementation of evidence-informed approaches.

Achieving lasting improvements will require coordinated action across government, research, public health and community sectors, alongside continued investment in prevention and the systems needed to translate policy into practice.

With more than four decades of experience translating nutrition evidence into action, National Nutrition Foundation brings practical expertise from working across schools, early childhood services, health services and community settings. This experience provides valuable insight into how nutrition initiatives can be implemented, evaluated and sustained in real-world settings.

Progress will depend on collaboration between governments, researchers, public health practitioners, community organisations and other sector partners, bringing together evidence, policy expertise, implementation experience and community perspectives.

The decisions made today will shape the health, wellbeing and productivity of current and future generations. We invite governments to work with us to turn existing commitments into measurable improvements in nutrition and health outcomes across Australia.

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