4.9 Diet

The food and beverages we consume (our diet) play an important role in our overall health and wellbeing. Food provides energy, nutrients and other components that, if consumed in insufficient or excess amounts, can result in ill health. A healthy diet helps to prevent and manage health risk factors such as overweight and obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, as well as associated chronic conditions, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some forms of cancer. Diet-related chronic conditions are among the leading causes of death and disability in Australia.

The five food groups

The Australian Dietary Guidelines provide advice on healthy eating habits to promote overall health and wellbeing, reduce the risk of diet-related disease and protect against chronic conditions. They recommend that Australians eat a wide variety of nutritious foods from the five food groups every day (NHMRC 2013). Food intake data from 2011–12 (the most comprehensive robust national dietary data available) show that most Australians did not consume the recommended number of serves from the five food groups (Table 4.9.1). Intake was particularly low for vegetables and legumes/beans (for children and adults); lean meats and alternatives (for children); and milk, yoghurt, cheese and alternatives (for women).

Table 4.9.1: Proportion of the population with usual food intakes below the recommended serves (per cent), by age group, sex and food group, 2011–12[(a)]

Food group	Boys	Girls	Men	Women
Vegetables and legumes/beans	99.6	99.7	96.5	94.8
Fruit[(b)]	53.5	54.0	70.7	77.0
Grain (cereal) foods	60.5	73.7	66.6	75.6
Lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds and legumes/beans	92.4	98.7	79.1	87.0
Milk, yoghurt, cheese and alternatives	80.4	79.8	89.9	96.5

(a) Boys and girls aged 2–18; men and women aged 19 and over.

(b) Includes dried fruit, fresh or canned fruit and fruit juice.

Source: ABS 2016b.

Key 'risk' nutrients

The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend limiting intake of foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol (NHMRC 2013). Food intake data from 2011–12 show that, as with the five food groups, many Australians are not following these recommendations.

- Saturated and trans fats should make up no more than 10% of total energy intake (NHMRC 2006). In 2011–12, both children and adults exceeded this recommendation (14% of total energy intake for children and 12% for adults) (ABS 2014).
- Adults should consume no more than 2,000 mg of sodium each day (NHMRC 2006). In 2011–12, average sodium intake for both men and women exceeded this recommendation (2,779 mg for men and 2,090 mg for women) (ABS 2014).
- Free sugars (sugars added to foods by manufacturers, cooks or consumers, as well as sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices and fruit juice concentrates) should make up less than 10% of total energy intake (WHO 2015). In 2011–12, over two-thirds (69%) of children and almost half (47%) of adults exceeded this recommendation. On average, free sugars contributed to 13% of total energy intake for boys and girls, 11% for men and 10% for women (ABS 2016a).
- To reduce the risk of alcohol-related disease and injury, healthy men and women should consume no more than two standard drinks on any one day (NHMRC 2009). In 2011–12, 10% of women and almost 3 times as many men (29%) exceeded this recommendation (ABS 2012). See Chapter 4.6 'Alcohol risk and harm' for more information.

What is missing from the picture?

Information on food and nutrient intake is important for policy makers, educators and health professionals in their work to promote optimal health and wellbeing. Most data on national food and nutrient intake in Australia are collected from surveys that are administered infrequently and based on self-reported information, which makes them prone to underreporting.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on nutrition is available on these AIHW websites:

- <www.aihw.gov.au/reports/biomedical-risk-factors/risk-factors-to-health/contents/risk-factors-and-disease-burden>
- <www.aihw.gov.au/reports-statistics/behaviours-risk-factors/food-nutrition/overview>.

Further information about the Australian Dietary Guidelines is available at <www.eatforhealth.gov.au>.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011–13 Australian Health Survey are available at <www.abs.gov.au/australianhealthsurvey>.

References

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ABS 2014. Australian Health Survey: nutrition first results—foods and nutrients, 2011–12. ABS cat. no. 4364.0.55.007. Canberra: ABS.

ABS 2016a. Australian Health Survey: consumption of added sugars, 2011–12. ABS cat. no. 4364.0.55.011. Canberra: ABS.

ABS 2016b. Australian Health Survey: consumption of food groups from the Australian Dietary Guidelines, 2011–12. ABS cat. no. 4364.0.55.012. Canberra: ABS.

NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) 2006. Nutrient reference values for Australia and New Zealand including recommended dietary intakes. Canberra: NHMRC.

NHMRC 2009. Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. Canberra: NHMRC.

NHMRC 2013. Australian Dietary Guidelines. Canberra: NHMRC.

WHO (World Health Organization) 2015. Guideline: sugars intake for adults and children. Geneva: WHO.