



Meat belongs on the menu in Canada's new national school food program

As children in Canada head back to school, the research is unequivocal – including meat on school food menus can help fill critical nutrition gaps. Recent evidence shows school-aged children often lack essential nutrients such as iron and zinc that meat delivers. For Canada's recently announced National School Food Policy, adopting a primarily plant-focused approach could leave vulnerable children lacking key nutrients they need more of.

Childhood and adolescence are particularly vulnerable life stages given rapid growth, cognitive development, bone mass accrual, puberty, and the onset of menstruation for girls. Research demonstrates that nutrition shortfalls among Canadian children extend beyond just a lack of vegetables and fruits. Animal-sourced foods, in particular red meats like beef, are [especially nutrient-dense](#) and contain key nutrients many school-aged children in Canada lack - in forms that are easiest for the human body to [absorb](#).

The 2023 [Food and Nutrition Security for Manitoba Youth Study](#) (FANS study) found 57% of students under-consumed meat and alternatives. The study found high levels of inadequate intakes of several essential nutrients including iron, zinc and calcium. [Health Canada's Evidence Review for Dietary Guidance](#) found 68% of girls and 55% of boys 14 to 18 years old ate less than the recommended servings of meat and alternatives, and teenage girls had inadequate intakes of most nutrients studied.

Findings published by [Health Canada in 2023](#) identified iron deficiency as a serious concern among Canadian youth, affecting 27% of girls 14 to 18 years old, and 10 to 12.5% of boys and girls 5 to 13 years old, respectively. According to the [Canadian Paediatric Society](#), iron deficiency can cause delayed cognitive and physical development, poor learning, and increases the risk of infection. Iron deficiency is also linked to [depression](#) and [other mental health disorders](#).

With [household food insecurity at an all-time high in Canada](#), one in four children under 18 now live with food insecurity. Food insecurity creates an additional burden, being associated with lower [protein](#) and [iron](#) intakes. As nutrient-dense sources of protein and iron, meats are an ideal menu item for school food programs, particularly as these programs can reach children who may otherwise not have access to these foods.

A 2023 [United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#) report urges governments to consider the contributions of animal-sourced foods for improved nutrition: The [FAO](#) emphasizes "Meat, eggs and milk offer crucial sources of much-needed essential nutrients which cannot easily be obtained from plant-based foods." The report notes that eating beef, specifically, has been shown to improve cognitive outcomes in school-age children and teens. [A separate study in American teens](#) found those who ate beef were more likely to have adequate intakes of iron, zinc, several B vitamins, and other nutrients, compared to those who did not.



There is no doubt that Canada's new national school food policy, announced on June 20, is a valuable opportunity to increase vegetable and fruit consumption, a much-needed improvement to school-aged children's diets. At the same time, a significant number of Canadian children and teens are not consuming recommended amounts of protein foods, and not getting enough of several essential nutrients - including iron, zinc, calcium and vitamin B12. These nutrients are difficult to get enough of from plant-sourced foods, but essential for proper growth and development.

[Canadian research shows the best quality diets include both animal and plant foods.](#) Meat provides a unique package of essential, highly bioavailable nutrients, that are complementary to plant-sourced foods. It is important to recognize diets without meat generally do not equally deliver several key nutrients many children are lacking.

Meat is well-liked, familiar and nutrient-dense. It belongs on school food program menus and will help address nutrient shortfalls. Canada's national school food policy is a historic opportunity to improve children's nutrient intakes and impact their long-term well-being. However, unless we address critical nutrition gaps and opportunities, we stand to miss the mark on achieving just that.

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