

Hard to Swallow: Ultra-Processed Food, the Global Standard.

Why is a healthy diet important?

What we *choose* to eat, and how much of it, effects they way our bodies function. A good diet equals good health, therefore a poor diet will lead to poor health. Consuming foods too high in salt, fat, sugar and unnecessary additives significantly increases the risk of chronic diseases; such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity and stroke (Rippin et al., 2023).

Most Australians are aware of the types of foods that contribute to a healthy diet and those that do not (Dietitians Australia, 2022). Food guidelines exists to promote healthy food choices and, although they differ from country to country, they are all based on the idea of a balanced diet that prioritises fruit and vegetables and limits fats, sugars and salts (Van Dyke et al., 2024). The Australian Dietary Guidelines of 2013, as the name suggests, has been developed to guide the choices in what Australians eat. *Table 1* shows the recommended serves of the 5 major food groups of adults aged 19 - 50.

What is a healthy diet?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines

Food Group	Recommended serves per day for Women (aged19-50)	Recommended serves per day for Men (aged19-50)
Vegetables and legumes	5	6
Fruit	2	2
Cereals and staples	6	6
Protein from lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, nuts, seeds, legumes and beans	2.5	3
Dairy or dairy alternatives	2.5	2.5

Table 1

Source: Australian Dietary Guidelines, 2013

In addition to this, the guidelines state to use small amounts of added fats and limit processed foods and beverages to occasional intake and in small servings.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) aims to provide guidelines to support good health and monitor health trends. WHO provides evidence based recommendations that are applicable worldwide, taking into account availability, food culture and economy (Saluja et al., 2022). *Table 2* shows the WHO recommendations for individuals aged 10 and over based on a daily intake of 2,000 calories.

Food Group	WHO Recommendation for daily intake
Carbohydrates from fruits, vegetables, whole grains and pulses	45 - 75% <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25 grams of fibre • 400 grams, combined, of fruit and vegetables
Proteins	10-15%
Fats	15-30% <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on unsaturated fats (fish, avocado, nuts and sunflower, canola, soybean and olive oil. • Less than 10% from saturated fats (animal fats) • Less than 1% from trans fats (found in processed foods as chemically altered fats used mainly to extend shelf life or stabilise the texture of a food item.
Salt	Less than 5 grams
Sugar	Less than 50 grams (12 teaspoons) of added sugar

Table 2

Source: WHO, 2026

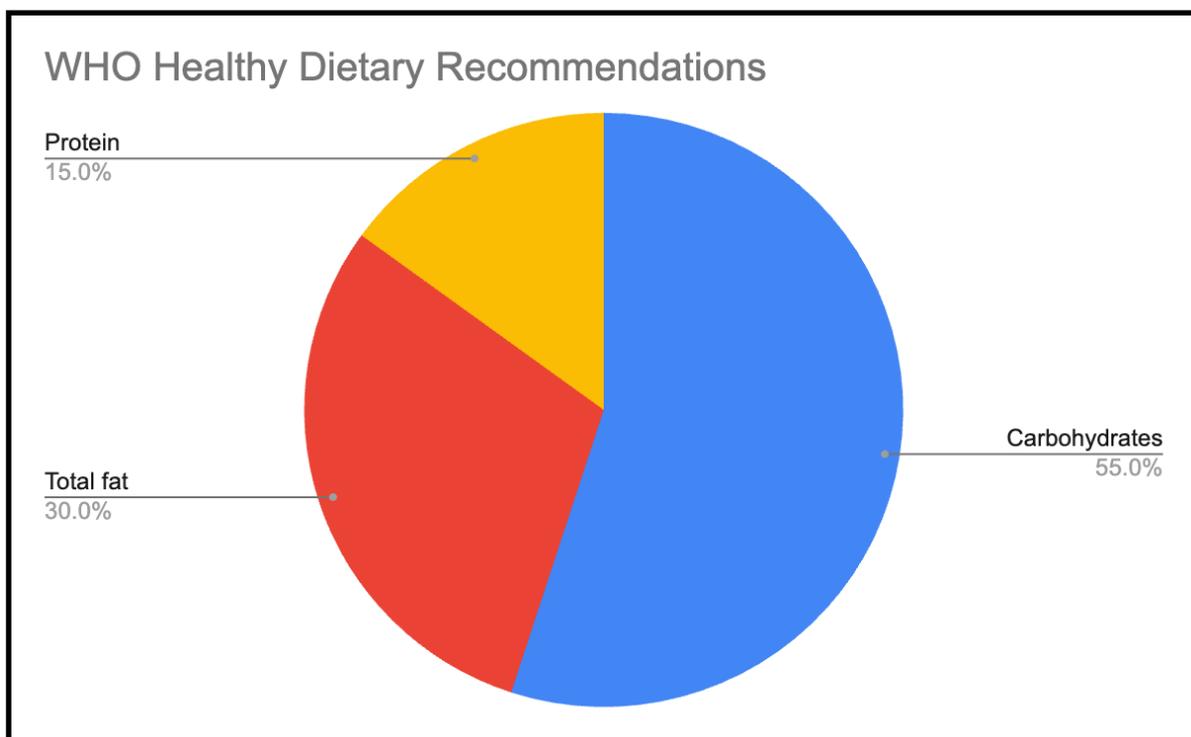


Figure 1

Source: WHO, 2026

4 very different countries - one very big problem

Australia has good health care as well as campaigns to improve awareness of health issues; Australians enjoy, for the most part, access to a wide variety of fresh foods, however, our rates of chronic disease, specifically obesity, are on the rise. In fact, obesity rates are a global concern with approximately 70% of those affected by obesity living in developing nations (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2025). Further to this, our diets are seeing an emergence of malnutrition in those with obesity due to the lack of nutrients in the foods being consumed (Kobylińska, 2022).

Let's compare the Australian diet with other countries to see what they are doing right, what we can learn from and possibly implement to improve our diets.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations ([FAOSTAT](#)) is a comprehensive database on food and agriculture. The Australian Bureau of Statistics is the national statistical agency which collects data on a number economic, social and environmental indicators. This research uses the data on dietary intakes which FAOSTAT has available for Brazil (2017-2018), Mexico (2016) and Saint Kitts and Nevis (2020), against the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) [National Nutrition and Physical Survey, 2023](#) to analyse the health and trends of our diet.

Odd combination of countries right?

Collecting data on a population's intake of food takes time and money; as a result surveys are not done very often. FAOSTAT currently only has intake data on Brazil, Mexico and Saint Kitts and Nevis. Since WHO recommendations are specifically developed to provide dietary goals that can be reached worldwide, and, given that trends in consumption of fruit and vegetables are slow to change, a comparison of daily intake from these countries from different years will offer valuable insight into the factors affecting diets worldwide, regardless of income.

Country Profiles

Brazil, South America: 4th largest producer of food

In 2014, Brazil implemented revolutionary dietary guidelines which focused on behaviours, such as opting to eat with company and refraining from doing other activities while mindfully eating (Gabe, 2021). The message was to enjoy the whole process involved with eating; from the planning, cooking and eating, to make it an important part of daily life, not to be rushed. When choosing food the Brazilian guidelines encourage the use of whole foods while being conscious of where the food comes from and its sustainability. The guidelines also ask Brazilians to be wary of the way certain foods are advertised and marketed (FAO, 2014 & Gabe, 2021).

Mexico, North America: 7th largest food exporter

The Mexican government, in 2014, implemented a 12% tax on sugary drinks and an 8% tax on foods with a calorie value greater than 275 per 100 grams (with the exception of food staples such as beans, oils, sugar and flour). Even though there has been a decrease in the sale of these items, the taxes did not cause a decrease in the calorie intake of the population (Aguilar, 2021). Further to this, they have implemented bans on the sale of junk food around the vicinity of schools as well as limitations as to their marketing and advertising with the use of warning labels. The dietary recommendation, like Brazil's, also focus on taking time to eat food with company, to avoid overeating and aim to include fruit and vegetables, cereals or legumes and animal protein at every meal (FAO, 2015).

Saint Kitts and Nevis, Carribean: heavily reliant on food imports

Due to its vulnerability to climate events and small land mass, approximately 60 - 80% of the island's food is imported and is responsible for providing the people with cheap, highly processed foods. Their food guidelines warn against the high salt content of some cultural foods and prohibits items such as pork and mayonnaise from being served at schools. Further to this, there is an emphasis on how food choices effect mental health (Carribean Nutrition Awareness Month, 2023). To combat the cost of importing foods, both on an economic and health front, the country is looking at reducing its dependence of imports by 25% by 2030 and focusing on producing their own foods and introducing a tax on sugary drinks.

Australia:

Australia's food labelling standards require all packaged foods to display the ingredients, origin and nutritional breakdown of foods. It ensures nutritional claims made on packaging meet a certain threshold. Australia also has a voluntary 5 star health rating system, that at a glance rates how healthy a food item is based on the amount of energy in kilojoules, nutritional benefits and the addition of unhealthy ingredients (Department of Health, Disability and Aging, 2025). As other countries around the world turn to initiative policies to reduce the lure and hold that highly processed foods have on us, Australia has remained stagnant in its policies to address our poor diet and the factors contributing to our poor food choices.

What are we eating:

Consuming a variety of types and colours of fruit and vegetables provides our bodies with the essential vitamins, minerals, fibre, antioxidants and other essential nutrients needed by our bodies to function well, while reducing the risk of chronic diseases (WHO, 2025). So how much fruit and vegetables do we consume?

Vegetables and Fruit: daily intake in grams

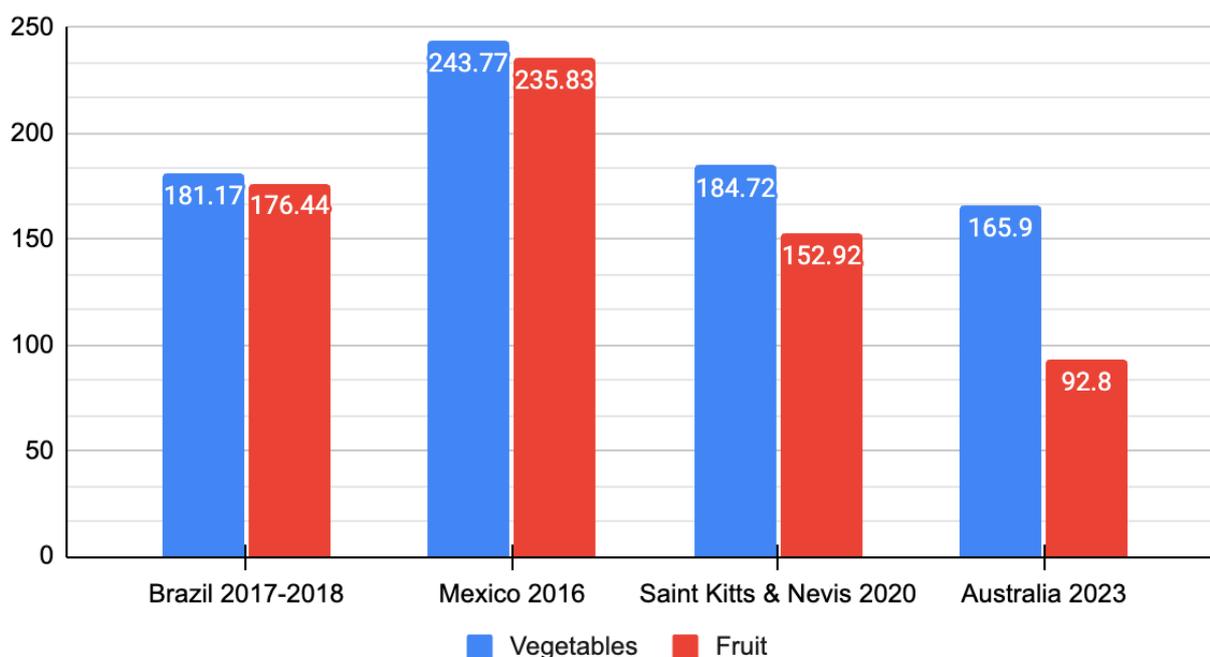


Figure 2

Source: FAOSTAT data sets and ABS National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey, 2023.

While most of us strive to increase our fruit and vegetable intake for health reasons, Mexico is already exceeding the recommendations. This raises the question, can we improve our diets by simply increasing our fruit and vegetable intake?

Major Food Groups: daily intake in grams

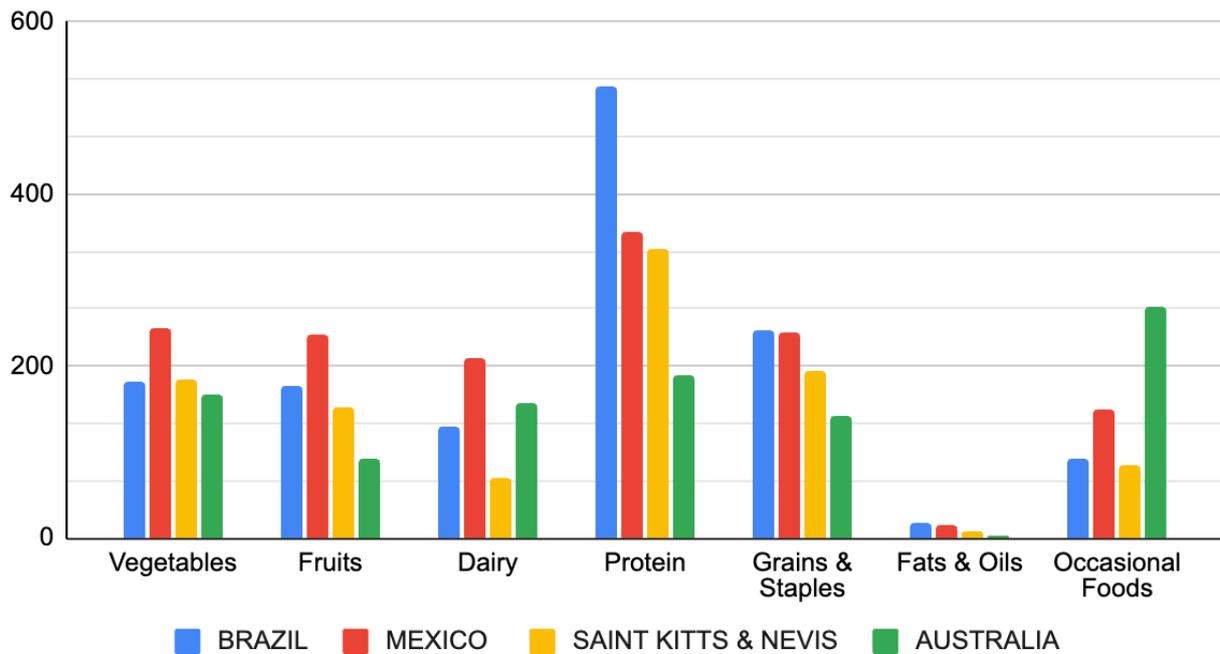


Figure 3 Source: FAOSTAT data sets and ABS National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey, 2023.

In Australia, the most consumed food group, alarmingly, is occasional foods. This category contains foods such as confectionary, sugar based products (honey, jams, spread and sauces), snack foods and baked and mixed goods (biscuits, cakes, pastries, pasta and pizza). These occasional foods are intended to be consumed in small portions and sporadically but Australians are doing the opposite, with approximately 24% of our daily intake belonging to food items in this category.

In contrast, Brazil, Mexico and Saint Kitts & Nevis show different dietary priorities. Brazil has the highest levels of protein intake which makes up approximately 38.5% of the Brazilian diet and is their most consumed food group.

While the data from Saint Kitts & Nevis shows the lowest intake of occasional food, approximately 68% less than Australia, it also shows that their obesity rates are the highest of the four researched countries; *Figure 4* below, proves to highlight the challenges in collecting accurate data as well as the complex factors involved in health and diet.

Prevalence% of obesity in the adult population (2016-2022)

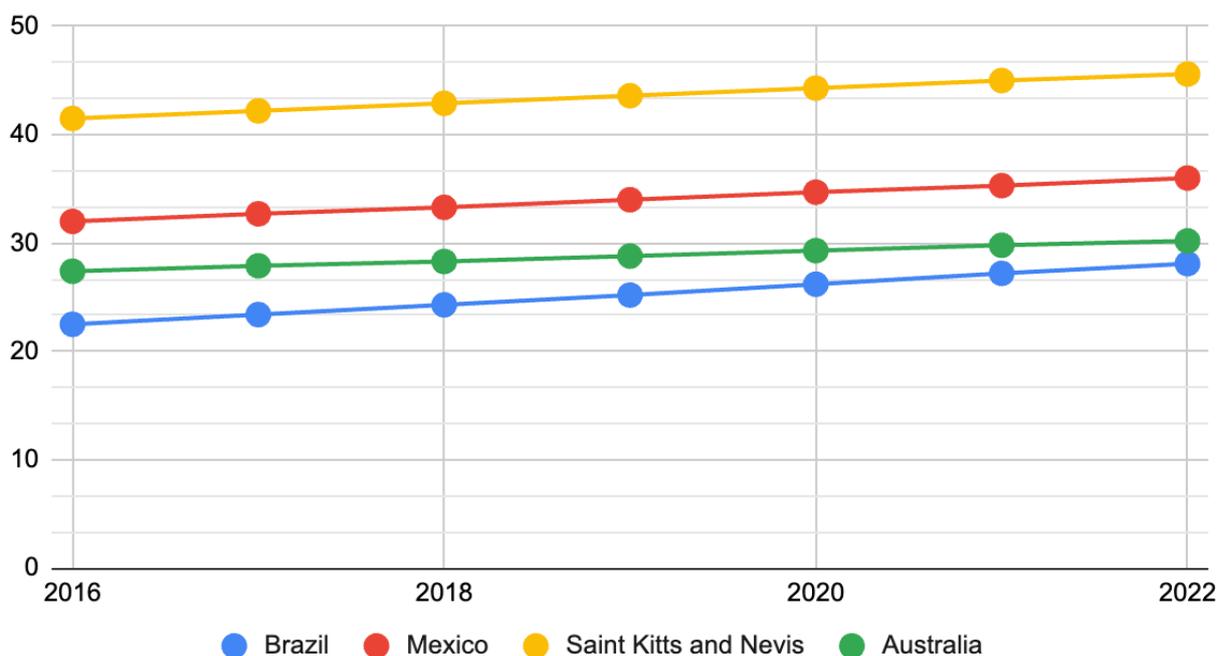


Figure 4.

FAOSTAT suite of food security indicators (obesity)

In 2022 obesity affected 890 million adults worldwide (WHO, 2025). With obesity rates increasing worldwide, nations and health organisations alike are racing to find ways to decrease the prevalence of obesity. In Australia, diet was the third leading risk factor contributing to poor health and premature death in 2018 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). Diets low in whole foods and fresh produce, high in processed foods and heavy with sodium, sugar and preservatives have been identified as factors leading to chronic disease.

Figure 4 above, shows a steady increase in obesity in all four countries, the prevalence of obesity in Saint Kitts and Nevis is significant with nearly half of the population affected by obesity by 2022. Mexico, while reaching WHO recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption, has obesity rates of 36%. To put this into perspective, let's broaden our focus more globally. Figure 5 demonstrates the steady increase in the rate of obesity and the disparity between the countries. While Samoa has over half of its population afflicted by obesity, Japan has seen an increase of only 2.9% from 2000 to 2022, with 5.5% of their population suffering from obesity.

Prevalence of obesity % 2000 - 2022

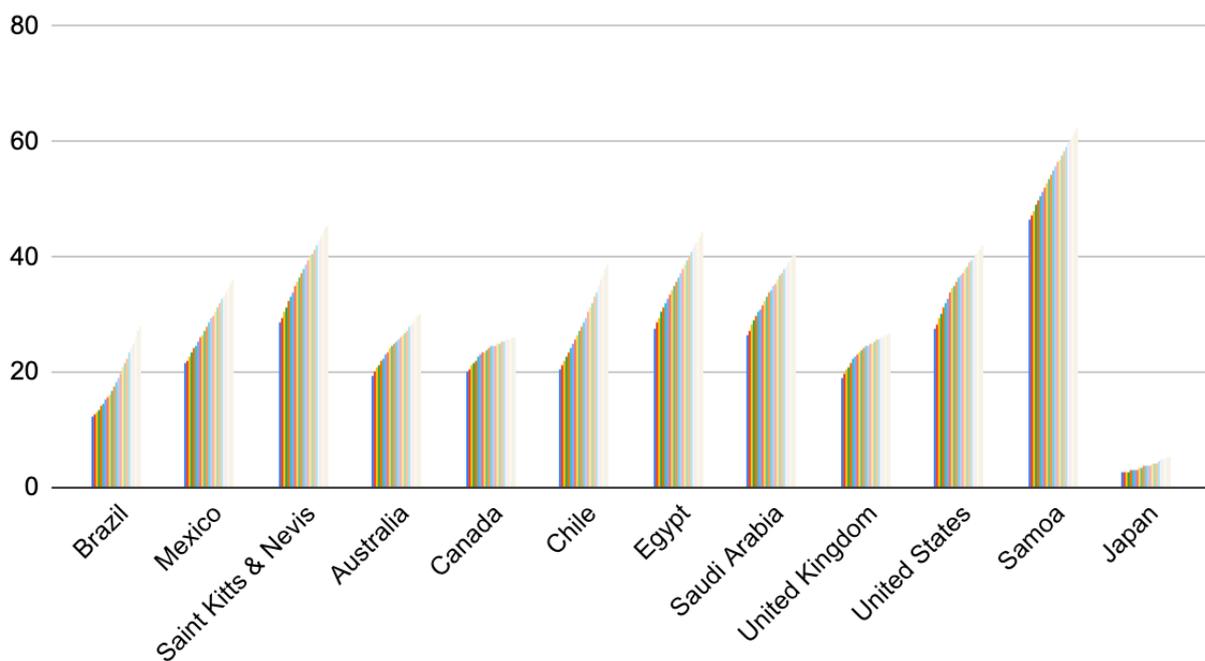


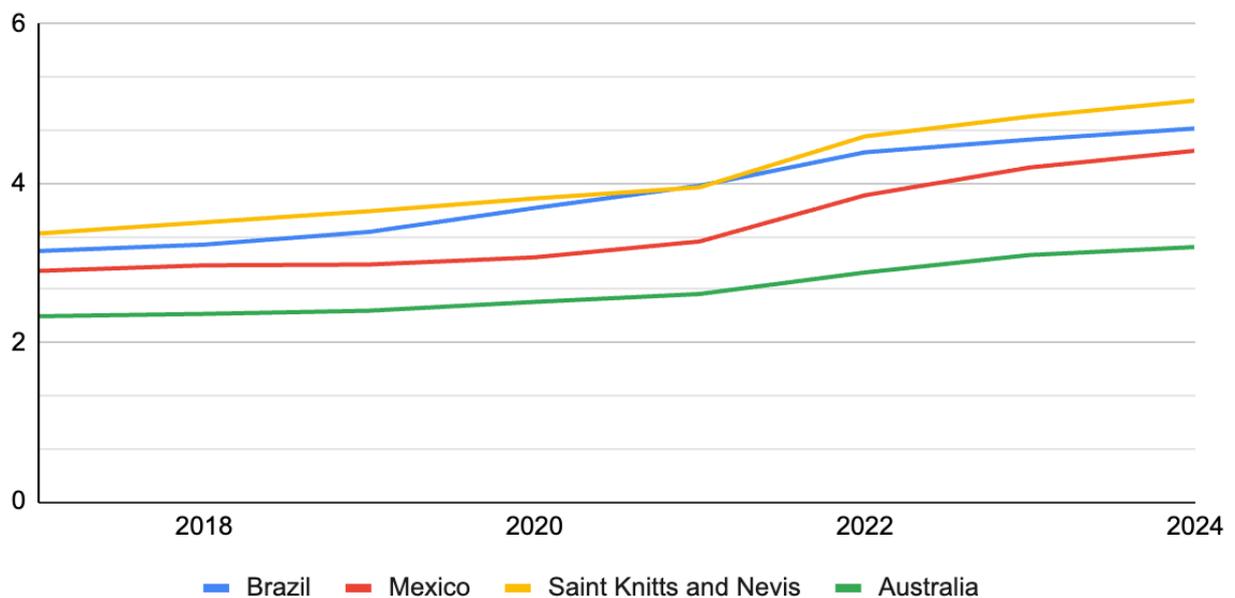
Figure 5

Source: [FAOSTAT](#)
[Link to interactive chart](#)

There is no denying that our diets are unhealthy (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). The main issue lies in the widespread consumption of processed food which provide very little nutrients. These food items are mass produced using cheap ingredients designed to prolong shelf life and increase profits (Lewis, et al., 2023). On a whole, processed foods require less human labour in comparison to fresh produce, which requires more time and is at the mercy of climate both in its production cycle and shelf life, thus effecting pricing and availability (Deakin University, n.d.). By continuing to collect data and analyse the reasons we are making certain food choices, despite, for the most part, knowing the components of a healthy diet, we may begin to reverse this harmful trend.

Factors such as: choosing convenience when time poor; cost and availability; and personal preferences, are some of the considerations Australians face when choosing what to eat. A recent study in the Lancet estimated that almost half of Australians' diets are made up of ultra processed foods (Baker et al., 2025). *Figure 6* shows the estimated cost of a healthy diet, per person, using the least expensive locally available foods to meet dietary guidelines. Australia shows the most affordability out of the four countries, however, a healthy diet in 2023 cost approximately AUD\$600 a fortnight for a family of four; for low income earners that was approximately a third to a quarter of their income (Razak, 2023).

Cost of a healthy diet, per person per day



The cost of a healthy diet is converted to international dollars using purchasing power parity (PPP)

Figure 6

Source: [FAOSTAT](#)

Improving the Australian diet is going to take more than individual willpower, why are the occasional foods groups contributing to at least a quarter of our diet? When people are reaching for processed foods over fresh produce due to time and cost, it's a clear sign that more focus needs to be paid to reverse this trend. It should not be a privilege to have a healthy and balanced diet and perhaps by learning from the policies of other countries and monitoring their impacts we can begin to cure the health of our diets.

What can we learn?

Australia's guideline relies heavily on the serves of each food group we need a day. This is in contrast to Brazil's focus on whole foods and the behavioural aspects of eating, such as not multi-tasking while eating, aiming to eat with company and being mindful of where the food has come from. Brazil's approach has the potential to shift our habits away from rush and convenience to becoming more intentional with how we choose what we eat and how we eat it.

Mexico's tax on sugary drinks has drastically reduced consumption and is estimated to have prevented 239,900 cases of obesity (Obesity Evidence Hub, n.d.). In 2020 Mexico implemented mandatory warning labels on food items with excessive amounts of calories, sugar, fats and sodium along with the advice of "*contains sweeteners, not recommended for children*" and "*contains caffeine, avoid giving to children*".



Figure 7

Source: Global Food Research Program

Australia can use these key takeaways to implement policies that target the prevalence of occasional foods in our diet and update our guidelines to make eating healthier easier to follow and implement for the general population.

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