

Encouraging healthy food and drink choices

An overview for local governments

Local government has a central role in supporting the health and wellbeing of their communities by protecting, improving and promoting public health and wellbeing within their municipality.

The *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015–2019* (State Government of Victoria 2015) acknowledges healthy eating as one of the six priority health promotion areas and stipulates the importance of promoting the consumption of healthy, sustainable and safe food and supporting healthy food choices.

The Victorian Government has developed the *Healthy Food Charter* (Department of Health 2013) and the *Healthy Choices: food and drink classification guide* (Department of Health and Human Services 2015) to help make sure that healthy foods and drinks are offered and promoted in places like hospitals, health services, sport and recreation centres, parks and workplaces. There are different policy documents that can assist in applying the Healthy Choices guidelines in these different settings. These documents provide key healthy eating messages.

The evidence

Reducing and preventing the growing problem of obesity is a clear public health priority. Obesity contributes around 8 per cent of the total burden of disease in Victoria, almost on par with tobacco use and almost double that caused by physical inactivity.

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs)¹ are contributing to levels of obesity in the population (Imamura et al. 2015). The *Victorian Population Health Survey* (VPHS) 2011–2012, with significant variation by local government areas found nearly 16 per cent of Victorians drink sugary drinks daily (Department of Health 2014), with over one-third (35 per cent) of total energy intake coming from discretionary foods and drinks (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Daily vegetable and fruit intakes are used as a proxy measure of diet quality. Only 7 per cent of Victorian adults meet the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating recommendation for vegetable intake and 45.9 per cent consume the recommended amount of fruit (Department of Health 2014).

The VicHealth Water Initiative is one of our key approaches to support more Victorians to adopt a healthier diet by choosing water and healthy food options, as outlined in the the VicHealth Action Agenda for Health Promotion (2013–2023).

Drinking water has many health benefits and, compared to SSBs, has:

- no added sugar or empty calories/kilojoules/energy
- oral health protective benefit of added fluoride (Dietitians' Association of Australia & Dental Health Services Victoria 2015) in most Victorian communities.

Tap water has even more advantages due to:

- low cost
- less impact on the environment compared to commercially packaged drinks.

¹ Sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) refers to any beverage with added sugar and includes soft drinks, flavoured mineral water, sports drinks, energy drinks, iced teas and fruit drinks.

Drinking water

To promote and encourage people to drink more water, free tap water should be accessible, appealing and available everywhere Victorians live, learn, work and play (Hopcraft & Cochrane 2013) in key settings such as workplaces, public spaces, early childhood settings and schools.

VicHealth commissioned research to evaluate the access and supply of water in a variety of settings, such as open spaces and sports and recreation centres. Based on the research findings and water refill stations informing prototype report (VicHealth 2014), water fountain guidelines (VicHealth 2016) have been developed to assist local governments to promote and encourage people to drink more water.

In addition, the manufacture, transportation and refrigeration of bottled water has considerable environmental impacts, with many bottles ending up in landfill or as litter rather than being recycled. Ensuring fresh tap water is accessible and available at all times reduces the number of plastic bottles being purchased and disposed of, which in turn reduces the amount of waste and litter generated within the local government area.

Local government can promote the health and wellbeing of residents by ensuring they have fresh tap water that is accessible and available. High quality public drinking water facilities also align with the Heatwave Planning Guide (Department of Health 2009), which addresses local heatwave or heat health plans for the municipality. This can include routine maintenance of water fountains and the promotion of drinking tap water. Drinking fountains are also acknowledged as key supporting infrastructure in the Healthy by Design guidelines for local governments by the Heart Foundation (National Heart Foundation of Australia 2009).



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