

Implementing Healthy Choices guidelines for environmentally sustainable food and drinks

Practice Note

OFFICIAL

Introduction

This Practice Note provides guidance on implementing the Healthy Choices policy framework to deliver both health and environmental sustainability outcomes.

Healthy Choices is the Victorian Government framework for improving the availability and promotion of healthier foods and drinks in key public and community settings where people spend their time, including health services, workplaces, sport and recreation centres, and parks. The Healthy Choices framework includes:

- a food and drink classification guide that explains the Victorian Government's traffic light system for classifying foods and drinks as GREEN (best choices), AMBER (choose carefully) or RED (limit).
- policy guidelines to support the implementation of Healthy Choices in these settings.
- a policy directive for Victorian health services that applies to in-house managed retail outlets, all vending and catering.^a

Implementation of the Healthy Choices policy framework is supported by the [Healthy Eating Advisory Service](https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/) <<https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/>>. The Practice Note adds to the Healthy Choices policy framework by providing environmental sustainability tips that can be applied when implementing the Healthy Choices guidelines.^b

Who should use this Practice Note?

The Practice Note can be used by health promotion and other staff in community health organisations, health services, local public health units, local government and other settings to implement Healthy Choices guidelines for both health and environmental sustainability outcomes in their service, setting or facility, and/or in other settings in their local community.

Many organisations can play a role to support implementation of Healthy Choices environmental sustainability action.

^a The Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services does not apply to inpatient meals. These are guided by [Nutrition and quality food standards for health services](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/quality-safety-service/nutrition-and-food-quality-standards-for-health-services). < <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/quality-safety-service/nutrition-and-food-quality-standards-for-health-services>>.

^b The Practice Note provides interim guidance that will be updated when the Australian Government releases new guidance under the National Health and Climate Strategy, and the revised Australian Dietary Guidelines in 2026.

Table 1 - Implementing Health Choices in services, settings and facilities

Organisation	Role
Community health	Community health organisations can model health promotion leadership role by taking action as a community health service to implement the Sustainability tips while implementing Healthy choices <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/preventive-health/healthy-choices> for health services and the Healthy choices: policy directive for health services <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/healthy-choices-policy-directive-and-guidelines-for-health-services>. Community health organisations can also promote uptake of the Sustainability tips in sport and recreation centres, and workplaces in their local community.
Health services	Health services are a large employer with food retail outlets, vending machines and catering. The health service can model health promotion leadership by taking action as a health service to implement the Sustainability tips while implementing Healthy choices for health services and the Healthy choices: policy directive for health services.
Local public health units	LPHUs can support action among key partners in the catchment to take up implementation of the Sustainability tips while implementing Healthy choices for health services. LPHUs can also model health promotion leadership by applying this guidance in their own workplace.
Local government	As a large employer, council can model health promotion leadership role by acting as a workplace to implement these Sustainability tips while implementing Healthy Choices in their own workplace and in council-owned facilities such as libraries, and in council-owned sport and recreation centres. Local government can also promote uptake of these Sustainability tips through policies and in their broader community.
Sport & recreation centres, parks and workplaces	Sport and recreation centres, parks and workplaces can implement these Sustainability tips while implementing Healthy Choices in their setting, service or facility.

Rationale

The food system, from production through to consumption and waste, is a major contributor to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, representing around one third of global emissions.¹ While global food systems are fundamental for human health, they can both be a threat to environmental sustainability and contribute to poor health through the increased availability and promotion of energy dense, nutrient poor food and drinks.

Unhealthy diets have contributed to a rise in obesity and diet-related disease such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers. By contrast, a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, legumes (dried peas, beans and lentils), nuts, seeds and whole grains, and with fewer animal-based foods is good for both health and the environment.²

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that shifting to healthy, diverse and plant-rich diets with moderate quantities of GHG-intensive animal protein can bring health and environmental co-benefits, reducing global mortality by up to 10 per cent, and food-related GHG emissions by up to 70 per cent by 2050.³

The Australian Dietary Guidelines also point to the health benefits and reduced environmental impact of dietary patterns in line with the Guidelines – that is, by eating nutritious foods and limiting consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor discretionary foods.⁴ Only five per cent of Australian adults meet the dietary guidelines for both fruit and vegetables. Discretionary foods and drinks account for around one-third of Australians’ daily energy intake, and for teenagers aged 14-18 years, this proportion is higher at 41 per cent. For adults aged 51-70 years, alcohol accounts for 22 per cent of discretionary food intake.⁵

The Australian Burden of Disease study shows that risk factors contributing the most disease burden were

- tobacco use (8.6%)
- overweight and obesity (8.4%)
- dietary risks (5.4%)
- high blood pressure (5.1%) and
- alcohol use (4.5%).

For dietary risk factors, a diet low in legumes contributed the most to disease burden (1.2%), followed by a diet low in wholegrains & high fibre cereals, diet high in sodium and diet high in red meat.⁶ High red meat and processed meat consumption, and insufficient fruit and vegetable consumption accounted for about half of the diet-related deaths in Australia in 2021.⁷

A population shift to healthy dietary patterns can promote and protect human health and the environment.⁸ Evidence suggests that a diet consistent with Australian Dietary Guidelines has a 42 per cent lower climate footprint than the average diet of Australian adults,⁹ and that discretionary foods contribute almost 30 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions of Australians’ dietary intake.¹⁰ Discretionary food and drinks, including ultra-processed foods, contribute to environmental impacts such as land-degradation, biodiversity loss, and food packaging waste.¹¹ In Australia, ultra-processed foods contribute 42 per cent of the total daily energy intake of Australians.¹²

Food waste and loss across the food system from production to consumption is also a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. In Australia, food waste accounts for 3.5 per cent of Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions and uses valuable land and water resources on food that is never consumed.¹³ Strategies to minimise food waste can contribute to improved food security outcomes, and have health and environmental co-benefits.

Table 2 - Health, environment and economic co-benefits

Health, environment and economic co-benefits
<p>This Practice Note focusses on the health and environmental sustainability co-benefits of healthy and sustainable food and drink provision, however there may be economic co-benefits as well.</p> <p>Promoting healthy and sustainable foods in food retail outlets, on menus and catering can be good for business to meet consumer demand for healthy sustainable foods. If consumers have access to sustainability information about food products, many will choose environmentally sustainable foods.¹⁴</p>

Environmental sustainability tips

Table 3 - Environmental sustainability tips for implementing Healthy Choices

Healthy choices	Environmental sustainability tips - for retailers, caterers, settings and services
<p>Foods and drinks provided in retail outlets and vending machines</p>	<p>Foods and drinks provided in retail outlets and vending machines</p>
<p>Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services</p> <p>Food must be provided in line with the Healthy choices: food and drinks classification guide and Policy guidelines for health services (at least 50 per cent of the food available or displayed classified GREEN and no more than 20 per cent classified RED). There is no sale of sugary (or RED category) drinks.</p> <p>Drinks classified GREEN must be at least 50 per cent of the total proportion of drinks available or displayed.</p> <p>In addition, drinks containing artificial or intense sweeteners (classified AMBER) must be no more than 20 per cent of the total proportion available or displayed.</p> <p>Healthy choices guidelines for sport and recreation, parks & workplaces</p> <p>Healthy options are offered and encouraged in line with the Healthy choices: food and drink classification guide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 50 per cent of foods and drinks available are GREEN • No more than 20 per cent of foods and drinks available are RED 	<p>Order environmentally sustainable food & drinks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference locally grown foods where possible. • Change up menus based on seasonal produce. • Increase availability of plant-based meals that are GREEN or AMBER. Add fruit, vegetables and legumes to items prepared on site. • Use FoodChecker <https://foodchecker.au/> to identify GREEN and AMBER food and drink options. • Limit availability of AMBER or RED foods, and replace with healthier, less packaged alternatives. <p>Reduce food waste</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure food is prepared and stored properly to avoid food spoilage. • Carefully plan food orders to avoid over-ordering. • Repurpose food scraps to safely create new ingredients or menu options, safely donate <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/food-safety/donating-food> surplus food to local charities or food rescue organisations, or compost organic waste - on-site where possible. <p>Reduce food packaging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide food and drinks on or in reusable <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/circular-economy-and-recycling/in-a-business-2/single-use-plastics-ban-centre/accepting-reusables-at-your-business> or returnable plates, bowls, and cups, and provide reusable utensils. • Single-use plastic <https://www.vic.gov.au/single-use-plastics> drinking straws, cutlery, plates, drink stirrers, and food service items made from expanded polystyrene are banned in Victoria • When reusable options aren't available, choose items that prioritise environmental responsibility. First, opt for recyclable products made from locally sourced materials and that can be recycled locally. Second, opt for compostable products that meet the Australian Standard (AS5810 or AS4736), where there is infrastructure set up to collect and process these compostable items to ensure they do not end up in landfill.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your wholesalers and suppliers to source less packaged items. • Provide appropriate bins to sort waste. <p>Support environmental sustainability practices by customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display signage that welcomes customer's own reusable containers for take away food and drinks where appropriate. • Ensure food waste and recycling bins are available for customer use, with signage on what customers should put in each bin. • Offer discounts to customers who provide re-usable coffee cups and containers. • Encourage customers to bring their water bottles and provide water filling stations. <p>Embed in organisational policy and practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a sustainability policy, action plan <https://endfoodwaste.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/FFW0029_Cafe-Food-Service-Report-Summary_297x210mm_FA_Digital-Version-Reduced.pdf> or circular business practices. • Upskill staff <https://endfoodwaste.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/NSW-EPA-Catering-Toolkit_Digital.pdf> on environmentally sustainable food and drink provision.
<p>Catering for meetings, functions and events</p>	<p>Catering for meetings, functions and events</p>
<p>Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services</p> <p>Food and drinks must be provided in line with the Healthy choices: workplace healthy eating policy and catering guide (no food or drinks classified RED can be provided, and the majority of food and drinks provided must be classified GREEN).</p> <p>Healthy choices guidelines for sport and recreation, parks & workplaces</p> <p>Healthy options are offered and encouraged in line with the Healthy choices: healthy eating policy and catering guide for workplaces:</p>	<p>Procure environmentally sustainable food & drinks</p> <p>For organisations purchasing catering with organisation funds for meetings, functions and events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give preference to GREEN and AMBER local and seasonal plant-based meals and menu items • Use the Catering for Good Directory <https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/catering-for-good/directory/?> to choose caterers that are delivering good health, social and environmental outcomes. The directory makes it easy to access healthier and more sustainable catering, including through highlighting GREEN and AMBER options that are available from caterers listed. • Ask your caterers to work with wholesalers and suppliers to source foods that have been produced in accordance with industry sustainability frameworks.

- The majority of foods and drinks provided are GREEN
 - AMBER foods and drinks are provided in small quantities only
 - No RED foods and drinks are provided
- User groups providing catering (for example, sports clubs) should ensure catering provided complies with the guidelines in this standard.

Provide environmentally sustainable food & drinks

For organisations that provide catering for meetings, functions and events:

- Preference locally grown foods where possible.
- Change up menus based on seasonal produce.
- Provide GREEN and AMBER menu options that are rich in fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and whole grains.
- Avoid provision of discretionary and ultra-processed foods and drinks.

Reduce food waste

- Ensure food is prepared and stored properly to avoid food spoilage.
- Ask your caterers to provide food ordering quantity advice to avoid food waste from over-ordering.
- Order culturally appropriate foods for your meeting, function or event to avoid food waste.
- Repurpose food scraps to safely create new ingredients or menu options, redistribute surplus food to local charities or food rescue organisations, and compost organic waste (ideally on-site where possible).

Reduce food packaging

- Provide food and drinks on or in [reusable](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/circular-economy-and-recycling/in-a-business-2/single-use-plastics-ban-centre/accepting-reusables-at-your-business) <<https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/circular-economy-and-recycling/in-a-business-2/single-use-plastics-ban-centre/accepting-reusables-at-your-business>> or returnable plates serving platters or containers, and collect for reuse.
- When reusable options aren't available, choose items that prioritise environmental responsibility. First, opt for recyclable products made from locally sourced materials and that can be recycled locally. Second, opt for compostable products that meet the Australian Standard (AS5810 or AS4736), where there is infrastructure set up to collect and process these compostable items to ensure they do not end up in landfill.
- Work with wholesalers and suppliers to source less packaged items. Avoid or reduce provision of individually wrapped or packaged foods.
- Provide appropriate bins to sort waste.

Support environmental sustainability practices by event attendees

- Encourage appropriate waste management by meeting, function and event attendees, including providing advice and signage on items which can be recycled or composted, so that waste can be managed properly.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage meeting, function and event attendees to bring their own reusable cups and water bottles. <p>Embed in organisational policy and practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a healthy and more sustainable food procurement policy <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/healthy-and-more-sustainable-food-procurement> for catering provided for meetings, functions and events. • Implement an organisational sustainability policy, action plan, <https://endfoodwaste.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Catering_Food_Waste_Action_Plan_DIGITAL.pdf> or circular business practices. • Upskill staff on environmentally sustainable food and drink provision.
<p>Food and drink advertising, promotion and display</p>	<p>Food and drink advertising, promotion and display</p>
<p>Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services</p> <p>Drinks classified GREEN must be at least 50 per cent of the total proportion of drinks available or displayed. In addition, drinks containing artificial or intense sweeteners (classified AMBER) must be no more than 20 per cent of the total proportion available or displayed.</p> <p>Both food and drinks classified RED cannot be promoted or advertised.</p> <p>Healthy choices guidelines for sport and recreation, parks & workplaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GREEN foods and drinks are actively advertised and promoted and prominently displayed • AMBER foods and drinks may be advertised and promoted, but not at the expense of GREEN choices • RED foods and drinks are not advertised or promoted or displayed in prominent areas <p>In addition, the organisation's logo is not used alongside RED foods and drinks.</p>	<p>Promote environmentally sustainable food and drinks to customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place GREEN local and seasonal plant-based foods and drinks at eye level and in prominent positions. • Display signage that promotes GREEN local, seasonal and plant-based food and drinks. • Encourage staff to promote these food and drinks.

Water	Water
<p>Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health services are also encouraged to have free drinking water (for example, water fountains, jugs of tap water) readily available and promoted. <p>Healthy choices guidelines for sport and recreation, parks & workplaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clean and safe tap water is always available free of charge (for example, from water bubblers and/or food outlets) in high traffic areas 	<p>Promote environmentally sustainable drinks to customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Display signage to promote tap water as the beverage of choice (e.g. 'Water is the drink of champions' and 'Don't forget your water bottle', 'Refill and refresh here').
Fundraising activities, prizes and giveaways	Fundraising activities, prizes and giveaways
<p>Healthy choices guidelines for sport and recreation, parks & workplaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fundraising that promotes unhealthy foods and drinks is discouraged, and healthier options or fundraising opportunities not related to foods and drinks are supported No RED foods and drinks are supplied as awards, give-aways, gifts and vouchers for children and youth 	<p>Promote environmentally sustainable fundraising to staff and customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preference environmentally sustainable fundraising (e.g. fruit and vegetable boxes) and non-food fundraising (e.g. plant drives, cookbooks, seeded bookmarks).

Policy and strategy

Victorian Government

The [Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2023–2027](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-health-and-wellbeing-plan-2023-27) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-health-and-wellbeing-plan-2023-27> includes the priority areas of “Increasing healthy eating” that supports the and “Tackling climate change and its impacts on health” to increase climate change co-benefits of initiatives.

The Victorian Government’s circular economy policy, [Recycling Victoria: a new economy](https://www.vic.gov.au/victorias-plan-circular-economy) <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorias-plan-circular-economy> is committed to halving food and organic waste going to landfill.

[The Path to Half](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/about-us/state-government-strategic-plans/victorias-plan-to-halve-food-waste) <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/about-us/state-government-strategic-plans/victorias-plan-to-halve-food-waste>, developed by Sustainability Victoria, prioritises the solutions to reduce food waste and its impacts in Victoria.

Australian Government

The Australian Government’s [National Health and Climate Health Strategy \(2023\)](https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/national-health-and-climate-strategy) <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/national-health-and-climate-strategy> includes multiple actions on sustainable food provision in health and aged care.

Guides and resources

Victorian Government

The [Healthy and more sustainable food procurement](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/healthy-and-more-sustainable-food-procurement) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/healthy-and-more-sustainable-food-procurement> guide and resources are provided to support organisations that order food and drinks for staff meetings, functions, and events.

The [Catering for Good Directory](https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/catering-for-good/) <https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/catering-for-good/> has been developed to help Victorian organisations access healthier and more sustainable catering options.

[FoodChecker](https://foodchecker.au/) <https://foodchecker.au/> can be used to classify drinks, snacks and meals as GREEN, AMBER or RED.

Sustainability Victoria provides information on [accepting reusables at your business](https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/circular-economy-and-recycling/in-a-business-2/single-use-plastics-ban-centre/accepting-reusables-at-your-business) <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/circular-economy-and-recycling/in-a-business-2/single-use-plastics-ban-centre/accepting-reusables-at-your-business> and Victoria’s regulations.

Tackling climate change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning - [Guidance for local government 2024](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/tackling-climate-change-impacts-health-municipal-public-health-wellbeing-planning) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/tackling-climate-change-impacts-health-municipal-public-health-wellbeing-planning> has been developed to assist councils in meeting their legislative obligations.

The Achievement Program's [Climate and Health](https://www.achievementprogram.health.vic.gov.au/climate-health) <https://www.achievementprogram.health.vic.gov.au/climate-health> pathway strengthens environmental sustainability activities in settings that will also support health and wellbeing.

[Climate change and health](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/climate-change-and-health-community-resources) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/climate-change-and-health-community-resources> community resources are available to raise awareness of the health impacts of climate change and actions the community can take to stay health. They are available in a range of formats and community languages.

Australian Government

End Food Waste Australia has worked with food industry partners to develop [Sector Action Plans](https://endfoodwaste.com.au/sector-action-plans/) to end food waste.

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization has produced a practical guide for [Planning healthy and sustainable meetings](https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/344739) and events.

Glossary

Discretionary foods include foods and drinks not necessary to provide the nutrients the body needs. Many of these are high in energy, saturated fats, added sugars and salt or alcohol, and low in fibre; and include cakes, sweet and savoury biscuits, confectionary, chocolate, desserts pastries, processed meats, savoury pastries and pies, ice cream, ice confections, butter, cream, spreads, potato chips, crisps, sugar-sweetened soft drinks and cordials, sports and energy drinks, and alcoholic drinks.¹⁵ Many discretionary foods are ultra-processed foods.

Plant-based foods are minimally processed foods derived from plants including fruits, vegetables, legumes, wholegrains, nuts, seeds, and unsaturated plant oils.¹⁶

Plant-based meat alternatives are designed to mimic meat products and substitute meat protein. They are generally made from plant-based vegetable protein or fungus protein and classified as ultra-processed foods. Research is needed to understand the long-term health impact of consuming these foods.¹⁷

Ultra-processed foods include a broad range of ready to eat products, including packaged snacks, carbonated soft drinks, instant noodles, and ready-made meals. These products are industrial formulations of ingredients primarily composed of chemically modified substances extracted from foods, along with additives to enhance taste, texture, appearance, and durability, with minimal to no inclusion of whole foods.¹⁸

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