

"It is the fundamental right of every Canadian to be well-nourished."

NUTRITION CANADA

## The Eating Habits of a Nation

The Canadian government has completed the first comprehensive study ever made of the eating habits of an entire nation.

A team led by Dr. Z. I. Sabry, Director of Nutrition Canada, for the Department of Health and Welfare, spent four years examining 19,000 people in the ten Canadian provinces and compiling twenty-six million facts.

It concluded that Canadians are ill-nourished (though not undernourished), but are probably no worse, Dr. Sabry said, than the citizens of other industrially advanced countries such as the United States.

The study found that:

- More than half of all Canadians are overweight.

- One out of six has high cholesterol.

- One out of sixteen (mostly in the Prairie Provinces) has an enlarged thyroid.

- Iron deficiencies, expected in women of childbearing age, were found among all age groups, in both sexes, and in as many as two out of three Indian children.

- There is a moderate deficiency of thiamin among adults and some deficiency of vitamin C. The latter is particularly prevalent among Eskimos, since foods containing the vitamin are not part of their diets.

- At least one out of every ten pregnant women was short of vitamin A.

- Most Canadians don't drink enough milk and, consequently, lack bone-building calcium and vitamin D.

Most interestingly, the survey — which included dietary interviews, dental, medical and anthropometric examinations and, in most cases, lab tests — found that in obesity "calories don't count," and that the caloric intakes of the overweight and the normal don't differ very much. Dr. Sabry said that some obese persons were found to have very low caloric intakes, but that this was counterbalanced by very low levels of physical activity; a person might take in only 1600 calories a day but if he expended only 1400 he would grow fat. (A person taking in 120 calories daily above his energy expenditure level will gain a pound a month.) Dr. Sabry said that changes in life styles and the misuse of technological aids has resulted in lowering of physical activity levels, and he suggests that government

and industry should fight fat by providing gymnastic facilities and encouraging sports.

The iron deficiency was found among all types of Canadians except young Eskimo men, who eat great amounts of caribou. (Anemia is unfortunately common among them, possibly because of non-nutritional problems, such as parasites.) The iron shortage may be due to the increase of refined foods and to the use of aluminum cooking pots instead of cast iron ones. A cast iron pot, "particularly a rusty one," is a good source of iron.

The survey was broken into three divisions, the biggest covering the general population and the two smaller ones covering Indians who live in bands and Eskimos who live in settlements. Most of the tests were done both in winter and summer. (Canadians maintained the same pluses and minuses in their diets in both seasons, which indicates a good food distribution system.) The deficiencies were found equally among income groups above and below the poverty level.

The report, which was presented to Parliament late last year, will be followed by more than a dozen supplementary ones on separate provinces, Eskimos, Indians, transient youth, food patterns, dental health and other subjects.

The report specifically calls for a national nutrition policy to "monitor the nutritional health of the nation," and it asks that the food industry consider nutrition with the same weight it gives texture, flavour and colour when it packages a new product. If the industry fails to accept this responsibility, the report said, the government should make sure that foods eaten as snacks or in place of meals have nutritional value. Dr. Sabry said that some foods which cannot be labelled "dangerous" are nevertheless poor nutritional choices. He cites as an example an orange drink that looks and tastes like orange juice but which lacks its nutritional quality. The report points out that food processing, storing and shipping have been "revolutionized" in the last ten years.

"We must decide that there is a limit to how far we can go in purifying our foods," Dr. Sabry said.

"If salad oil is purified to the point that vitamin E is removed for the sake of decolourization and deodourization, we have gone too far."