

# Food for thought

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**W**hat should we eat in order to stay healthy and avoid disease? Nutrition is one of the biggest drivers of chronic diseases, including obesity and diabetes, yet the answer to this seemingly simple question remains a subject of heated debate. A new series of articles in *The BMJ* aims to cut through the confusion and controversy to bring the latest evidence on nutrition to clinicians.<sup>1</sup>

The number of studies exploring the link between food and health has grown substantially over the past 50 years,<sup>2</sup> but the extent to which the growth in information has been matched by greater understanding is questionable. Navigating the vast evidence base is challenging, even more so when concerns about weak science, vested interests, and conflicting or distorted media messages also muddy the waters. Nor do people eat for purely utilitarian ends. Food is central to culture and identity, which leads to strongly held preferences, beliefs, and biases.

Our goal at *The BMJ* is to advance understanding through research and debate, but we recognise that sometimes additions to the literature can generate more heat than light. This series is our attempt to take a different approach. We have brought together some of the world's most thoughtful and influential voices in the field of nutrition and health,

representing a range of backgrounds and perspectives, to help make sense of the state of current knowledge, the quality of the evidence on key issues, the extent and implications of potential disagreements between experts, and the agenda for further research.

Guided by our series advisers, Dariush Mozaffarian and Nita Forouhi, we have chosen topics covering priority areas of clinical interest and unresolved controversy. The articles consider questions that will help doctors offer clarity and sensible advice to patients and guide policy makers towards effective actions. Is there a link between saturated fat and heart disease? What are the best diets for weight loss, and how good is the evidence to support them? Can a particular dietary pattern help prevent or reverse type 2 diabetes? Will interventions focused on personalised nutrition and the gut microbiome be beneficial for health? How can we address the urgent global problems of hunger and malnutrition? And what is the role of government and the food industry in tackling ill health related to food? The articles lay out what we know and what we've yet to learn in these areas and more. Following the initial launch, more articles are planned in the coming months covering topics ranging from the relation between food and cancer to the quality of dietary guidelines.

In a field notable for strong opinions and, often, polarised debate, a key ambition of the series is to bring together authors with a range of viewpoints and ensure a balanced approach to the evidence as far as possible. Authors have been tasked with outlining areas of consensus and uncertainty, and

have been encouraged to discuss their disagreements in the text rather than come to forced compromise.

To bring the series to as wide an audience as possible we have partnered with The Swiss Re Institute to fund open access publication for the articles. The series will be launched at a meeting co-hosted by *The BMJ* and the Swiss Re Institute in Zurich, bringing together nutritional researchers, clinicians, and policy makers to discuss themes such as dietary fats and health, the role of bias in nutritional research, and the role of commercial food systems in promoting health.

These articles won't of course be the last word on nutrition and health. When the science is so contested and opinions so deeply held, debates will continue, new research will be done, and knowledge will evolve. But we hope these articles achieve a new approach in bringing together different perspectives, establishing consensus where possible, spelling out uncertainty where necessary, and moving the field forward. They set out a credible future research agenda, meaningful evidence based policy actions, and clearer messages for clinicians to help improve the health of their patients and the public.

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