

Food environments and human health



This month, *Nature Food* presents a Focus issue on the recent evolution of food environments, their influence on individual food choices and efforts to reduce their impact on public health.

Unhealthy diets are a major contributor to non-communicable diseases, the greatest burden of morbidity and mortality worldwide. Efforts to improve dietary habits, both at the individual and societal levels, are urgently needed.

Great responsibility to ensure more nutritious and sustainable diets lies with consumers, reinforcing the need for better and more accessible information in support of individual food choices. At the same time, these same food choices are strongly influenced by economic and political structures that ultimately determine which foods are available, accessible and/or affordable to people. Incentives for food corporations and governments to change these structures are therefore key to achieve healthier food environments.

Celebrating *Nature Food*'s fifth anniversary (*Nat. Food* 6, 1; 2025), the **Focus** issue 'Food environments and human health' launched this month brings together original opinion pieces and primary research on different aspects of food environments as determinants of people's food choices and health.

In an **interview** about the state of the global food environment, Francesco Branca, invited professor of public health at the University of Geneva, argues that nutrition must be central

to countries' public health response to the double burden of malnutrition currently faced around the world. The former director of the Department of Nutrition and Food Safety at the World Health Organization examines how food environments have changed in recent decades, stressing the aggravation of inequalities and the increasing prevalence of processed and ultra-processed foods (UPFs) – underscoring the need to prioritize people's nutritional requirements over the market's focus on food commodities.

Evidence of the impact of the retail food environment on human health on a global scale is still lacking, despite being paramount to inform transformative policies. To help fill this gap, the **Article** by Scapin et al. analyses trends in the retail food environment across 97 countries over the past 2 decades and their association with the incidence of obesity. The authors provide details of the increasing dominance of the global retail food environment by large chain outlets, digital grocery sales and unhealthy food offers.

Also concerning the contribution of private actors to (un)healthy food environments, the **Comment** by Popkin et al. argues that the food industry has taken advantage of humans' innate preferences for sugar, salt and fat to encourage overconsumption of specific food products, thereby posing a serious risk to human health in the name of profit. The **Comment** from Bradbury et al. calls for a shift of the responsibility for populations' health from consumers to producers, flagging poor accountability of food corporations as a primary driver of low-quality diets.

Looking at government action to mitigate the burden of diet-related non-communicable

diseases on public health systems, the **study** by Northcott et al. indicates that regulatory responses to UPFs have focused on individual behaviour rather than the promotion of systemic changes, highlighting the need for policies targeted at more upstream determinants of UPF consumption. The **Comment** by Ridberg et al. flags the need – and opportunity – to change this picture by integrating food-based nutritional interventions into healthcare systems through initiatives such as the 'Food is Medicine' programme in the USA. The **Perspective** by Grummon et al. suggests that federal policy action towards healthier food environments has been limited there and calls for the involvement of researchers and advocates in state and local policymaking as a way to ensure that food environment changes are better suited to different social segments and their specific needs.

Finally, the **Focus** features two papers related to tools that can aid better dietary choices by individuals. The **Resource** by Menichetti et al. presents a newly developed database of more than 50,000 food items sold in large supermarket chains in the USA, with information on the degree of food processing and alternative food products. The **Perspective** by Julia et al. discusses front-of-pack labelling systems in Europe with an emphasis on Nutri-Score, calling for more transparent and evidence-based decision-making processes for the development of a European legislation on the topic.

We hope you enjoy the read!

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