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Should I have the salad or the poutine?

DIAL A DIETITIAN

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Are trans-fat-free chips a healthy snack? Will dark chocolate lower my blood pressure? Is my detox diet dangerous?

These are the kinds of questions Ontario residents may soon be putting to a government-funded hotline in the latest example of the province's efforts to combat obesity.

In an era when bookstore shelves are filled with diet books, municipalities across North America are banning trans fats and lobbyists are calling for detailed food labelling, Ontario has announced it will spend \$2-million on a toll-free telephone line that will aim to connect as many as 50,000 people a year with an on-call team of dietitians.

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SERVICE FOR THOSE STUMPED ABOUT WHAT TO EAT

HOTLINE

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The purpose of the 1-800 number — staffed by three full-time and seven part-time registered dietitians — is to help Ontarians by dispensing advice about what they should and should not eat, explained Health Promotion Minister Jim Watson.

He pointed to a recent study that found Canadian childhood obesity rates rank fifth-highest out of 34 developed countries, and said the combination of “physical inactivity and poor eating habits” were creating what he called a proverbial perfect storm.

Helen Haresign, spokeswoman for Dietitians of Canada, said the phone line will be helpful for people who are starting to get the message about eating fruits and vegetables and cutting out trans fats and sugar, but who are stumped about where to start.

“I think these days most people have made the link between eating well and feeling well and [the] prevention of chronic disease,” she said. “I think the stumbling block for a lot of people ... is acting upon it.”

She said it is less a matter of whether the Big Mac or the Whopper makes a healthier dinner, but rather digesting the steady diet of complicated and seemingly contradictory information about healthy eating that consumers are being fed at the supermarket, on television and in the news.

“Part of the challenge is they're being flooded or inundated with claims in the marketplace,” she said. “It's often conflicting or confusing information. So how does an individual start to make sense of all that in terms of interpreting it in terms of their day-to-day food choices?”

Dietitians of Canada will help set up Ontario's EatRight program, which is being modelled after British Columbia's Dial-a-Dietitian, which has been in operation for 35 years and is now run by B.C.'s Health Ministry.

Kathleen Quinn, a team manager for Dial-A-Dietitian, said queries range from confusion over the latest medical research to how to manage diabetes.

“We get questions about vegetarianism,” she said. “We get, ‘My baby's just starting solid foods, what should I feed him?’ ‘I'm pregnant, what can I eat?’”

Ontario officials say they expect the most popular questions will relate to heart health, weight management and feeding babies and young children. Callers looking for more in-depth counselling, such as those struggling with severe obesity or a recent diabetes diagnosis, will be referred to outside agencies.

Joey Schulman, a nutritionist and vice-president of Toronto's Truestar weight-loss and wellness clinic, said she thinks a hotline is a “fabulous” idea — especially one that offers a live person

to answer questions instead of leaving people to their own devices deciphering Web sites, books or labels.

She gets questions from her patients about portion size, label reading and food sensitivities, as well as additives and preservatives, she said.

“Every single day I get questions about weight loss. I also get whole wheat versus whole grain. I don't just get this sometimes, I get this all the time.”

The more people take charge of their health, the more questions she gets as they struggle to digest all the information they are being fed, she said.

“I think people are so confused,” Dr. Schulman said. “There's this magic-bullet approach to health that still exists. People are grabbing on to the latest fads — high-protein, low-calorie — and that's just not how health works. Because of that, there's so much misinformation that it makes the waters a little bit muddy when it comes to health.”

The good news is that there is a lot more research out there, the issue of healthy eating is always in the news and consumers are far more aware, she said.

“Nutrition is in and it's not going anywhere.”

Critics from the Ontario NDP blasted the announcement as “outrageous,” saying the money would be better spent funding higher food allowances for vulnerable citizens.

“A hotline won't help the 330,000 Ontarians who use food banks — 40% of whom are children,” New Democrat MPP Paul Ferreira said in a statement.

The Ontario hotline will soon be operating at 1-877-510-5102.

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