



Fortification dilemma

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If your favourite bag of potato chips contained added vitamins and minerals, would you eat more of them? Would

you eat less of a healthy food now that you could get this fortified junk food? Those questions are at the center of a debate raging at Health Canada and in the nutrition community.

Fortification is quite simply adding vitamins and minerals to existing food. Examples include adding vitamin D to milk and enriching flour with B vitamins and iron to replace those lost in processing. Fortification improves the nutritional quality of the Canadian food supply, something which has had many public health benefits.

While many foods are already fortified, Health Canada recently moved to change its policies to allow ‘discretionary fortification’. That is, allowing manufacturers the leeway to fortify any foods they want — within guidelines. When this amendment to our Food & Drug Regulations became known earlier this year, the very loud concerns of many in the health field led to its postponement and review.

Discretionary fortification would allow companies for the first time to fortify and market the presence of healthy ingredients in fundamentally unhealthy foods. In other words, adding some vitamins or minerals to potato chips does not make them any less unhealthy.

Health Canada and people in the health community are divided on the topic. Proponents figure people are eating junk food anyway, so why not add some nutrients? On the other hand, those opposing the move think it will allow companies to sell junk food such as

chips and cookies with vitamins added as a ‘healthy’ alternative. Their concern is captured with the idea that could evolve: “I don’t need an apple a day — I can have a chocolate bar a day instead!”

One rationale presented by Health Canada is that allowing discretionary fortification would encourage innovation and development of new fortified products in Canada and reduce regulatory differences with the United States where the practice has long been allowed. Quoted on CTV.ca, the Food & Consumer Products of Canada, an industry group, said that they were only looking for smarter regulation so as to provide Canadians healthy products that are now available in other countries.

In preparing the proposed new regulations, Health Canada conducted focus groups to consider the implications of the changes. They found that Canadians are “unlikely to choose foods of limited nutritional value over healthy foods simply on the basis of fortification.” They also found no evidence that would increase their consumption of ‘junk’ foods just because they were fortified.

Dieticians of Canada supports fortification, “when there is a ‘clear public health need,’” but does not support leaving the decision to industry. They feel that there is potential for people

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to substitute these foods in place of healthier whole food options. If this occurs, it may add to the obesity problem in Canada. More specifically, “we feel that children and youth are particularly vulnerable to this practice.

After all, adding a few nutrients to an essentially unhealthy choice won’t remove its calories or fat. Think about it.