



STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

Cost of Nutritious Food Basket – Toronto 2014

Date:	October 31, 2014
To:	Board of Health
From:	Medical Officer of Health
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the cost of the Nutritious Food Basket in Toronto for 2014. The Nutritious Food Basket is a food costing tool used to measure the cost of a basic level of healthy eating in each of the Board of Health (BOH) jurisdictions within Ontario. The survey protocol provides operational direction to the BOH in monitoring food affordability, as it relates to poverty, health outcomes and health inequities.

In 2014, the estimated average weekly cost of the Nutritious Food Basket for a reference family of four in Toronto is \$193.05 (\$835.91 per month). This represents a 5.4% increase in the cost of food from the 2013 pricing survey.

It is important to note that the Nutritious Food Basket includes 67 foods, which is set by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The foods listed are based on the assumption that all meals are almost exclusively made from scratch; and do not include snacks or culturally-appropriate foods. The annual list also does not include infant formula and baby food and frozen or packaged/prepared foods that are often purchased by lower income families as these food items are often cheaper and easier to prepare. As Toronto is a large and heterogeneous urban centre, the annual survey likely underestimates the household cost of food. Revising the survey could result in a more accurate reflection of the true cost of food which includes ethno-culturally appropriate, pre-packaged/frozen and snack foods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care update the Nutritious Food Basket tool to more accurately reflect the true cost of eating per household, including food items that are ethno-culturally appropriate, pre-packaged/frozen and snack foods.
2. The Board of Health forward this report to: the General Managers of Employment and Social Services; Shelter, Support and Housing Administration; Children's Services; Affordable Housing Office; Economic Development and Culture; Social Development, Finance and Administration; Urban HEART; Ontario Minister of Health and Long-Term Care; Community and Social Services; Children & Youth Services, and the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion; Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health; Public Health Ontario; the Association of Local Public Health Agencies; the Ontario Public Health Association; the Association of Ontario Health Centres; the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health; Dietitians of Canada; and the five Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) in the Greater Toronto area.

Financial Impact

This report will have no direct financial implications.

DECISION HISTORY

Since 1999, Toronto Public Health has reported annually to the BOH on the Nutritious Food Basket survey findings. In 2008, the *Nutritious Food Basket Protocol* was updated and all Ontario Boards of Health mandated to monitor food affordability in accordance with the new *Nutritious Food Basket Protocol, 2008* and the *Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol, 2008*, as stated in the Ontario Public Health Standards 2008. Each year, results from the Nutritious Food Basket survey are submitted to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care by July 1.

The 2013 Nutritious Food Basket survey results were presented to the BOH at its meeting on September 30, 2013:

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2013.HL24.4>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Previous reports on the affordability of the Nutritious Food Basket highlighted the correlation between food insecurity and inadequate income. Food security is essential for healthy eating – without access to sufficient nutritious food, healthy eating cannot be achieved, increasing the risk of poor health.

COMMENTS

The Nutritious Food Basket Survey

The Nutritious Food Basket is a survey tool that is a measure of the cost of healthy eating. A fixed basket of 67 foods in specified purchase units are priced at twelve grocery stores. The Nutritious Food Basket is used to monitor both affordability and accessibility of foods by relating the cost of the food basket to individual and household incomes. The survey reflects an eating pattern that meets the recommendations from *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* and accounts for eating behaviours and food purchasing patterns highlighted in the Canadian Community Healthy Survey 2.2 results.

In 2014, the average weekly cost for a family of four to purchase the Nutritious Food Basket in Toronto in 2014 is \$193.05 or \$835.91/month. This represents an increase of 5.4% in the cost of food from the survey conducted in 2013. The main contributors to the rise in costs were:

- **Meat and Alternatives:** pork 28%; lentils 24%; beef 15%; fish 14%; chicken 13%; peanuts 11%;
- **Vegetables and Fruit:** pepper 27%; broccoli 25%; oranges 24%; iceberg lettuce 23%; sweet potato 18%; green peas, cabbage and potato 17%; snap beans 13%; pear 11%; grapes 10%.

Food Insecurity and Health

Food insecurity is recognized as a serious public health issue in high-income countries. Food insecurity is defined as the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so, due to financial constraints (1). Most recent estimates in Canada from 2012 reveal that 12.6% of households experienced some degree of food insecurity during the previous twelve months.

Food insecurity has been linked with higher rates of chronic health conditions, greater risk of vulnerable health among children and poor nutritional status among adults. Research indicates that health risks are heightened with the severity of food security, as well as, duration of the experience (2).

Food insecurity impacts on nutritional intake and can contribute to a number of diet-related diseases. Canadian research has shown that adults and teens (but not children) in food insecure households have lower intakes of vegetables and fruit and milk products and are at higher risk of inadequate intakes of several key nutrients, including protein, vitamin A, folate and other B vitamins, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc (3). Corresponding nutrient deficiencies may lead to the development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes or depression (4-9), and lack of access to adequate healthy food makes it difficult to manage chronic disease and nutrition-related illness.

A Closer Look at the Nutritious Food Basket Survey Tool

The Nutritious Food Basket survey in its current form makes a number of assumptions, including:

- Individuals always purchase according to the lowest price and not necessarily according to need, preference or availability;
- Individuals have the time, skills and equipment to prepare meals;
- Individuals have access to quality grocery stores and literacy and language skills to shop for the lowest price;
- Grocery shopping is a regular activity (every one to two weeks). The frequency of shopping impacts package sizes that are purchased;
- Since the food basket is based on average household purchasing patterns, the specific food purchasing patterns of any ethno-cultural or age group is not represented.

Reviewing the Nutritious Food Basket Survey

Developing a realistic basket of foods involves balancing several important factors. Adaptations to the tool should reflect current dietary recommendations, culturally appropriate foods and variations in shopping practices, actual consumption patterns, different household size and income levels within the study areas.

According to the store selection criteria, as referenced in the *Nutritious Food Basket Protocol, 2008* (or as current) (10), food costing is conducted each year in May within a two week period. Foods are priced in a minimum of six grocery stores or maximum of twelve within the health unit catchment area. For Toronto, twelve stores are chosen for the survey. The selected stores align with Toronto Public Health's planning areas customarily used for service delivery. A systematic selection of stores ensures that the final set of stores characterizes: each of the major chains; both premium and discount stores from any of the major chains; and independent grocery stores. However, a re-examination of the Nutritious Food Basket survey is warranted - one that makes allowances for ethno-cultural food practices, pre-packaged/frozen foods and snack foods. The inclusion of these items in the survey would more accurately reflect the true cost of healthy eating in Toronto. These additions would also achieve representation of Toronto's large and heterogeneous population and socio-demographic characteristics.

Implications of Findings for City Programs

Rising food costs can have both short-term impacts and long-term consequences on outcomes of city programs and services which have food as a component.

Student Nutrition Programs, which provide healthy meals and snacks to 155,484 children and youth in 681 programs across the city, will face additional budget pressures this new school year as a result of higher food costs. The full municipal grant for student nutrition programs is dedicated to the cost of purchasing nutritious food (\$7,071,839 in 2014) and accounts for a 14% contribution rate by the City of Toronto towards the total cost the program. A 5.4% increase in food costs translates into a net increase of \$381,879 on the existing municipally funded programs. A cost of living adjustment is required to purchase nutritious food and maintain the current nutritional standards for these programs. In August 2014, a report outlining a 2015 Operating Budget increase for the Student Nutrition Program was submitted to the Board of Health for consideration requesting a \$381,879 net increase to cover increased food costs.

The Healthiest Babies Possible and Peer Nutrition programs serve “at-risk”, culturally diverse Toronto families. These programs provide food vouchers to participants, such as pregnant women and parents with children up to six years old. Food vouchers are intended to help clients purchase healthy foods, such as vegetables and fruit and milk and alternatives to meet key nutrients needed for healthy pregnancies and for adequate growth and development in the early years. Increased food costs reduces the purchasing power for these much needed nutritious foods. The TPH 2015 Operating Budget for these programs can accommodate current food costs. A review of the use of food vouchers in TPH programs is underway and will include approaches to managing increasing food costs in the future.

The rise in food costs will also have an impact on all City programs and services that provide food, including child care centres, homes for the aged and shelters for homeless people. In 2013, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration under its Emergency Shelter and Related Support activities provided 862,401 meals and snacks totalling \$5.5 M; and 153,375 food allowances provided totaled \$0.614 M. A 5.4% increase in food costs will place further budget pressures on food-based programs and services for Toronto's most vulnerable populations.

Food security is a profound marker of health inequity in Toronto. The Nutritious Food Basket data can assist in identifying community issues and needs. Amendments to the current list of 67 foods set by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term – to include foods that are ethno-culturally appropriate, pre-packaged/frozen, as well as, snack foods - would more accurately reflect the true cost of healthy eating in Toronto. This information could inform decision making on key areas for investment to improve the health of communities, with a particular focus on vulnerable populations.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Weekly Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket in Toronto, May 2014
Attachment 2: May 2014 Nutritious Food Basket Scenarios

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