Appendix A: The Nutritious Food Basket Costing Tool in Toronto (2009-2019)

Mandate to monitor food affordability

Ontario Public Health Units (PHUs) are mandated by the Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Protocol (2018) within the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) (2018) to monitor food affordability. While the OPHS no longer includes a protocol, further guidance is provided by the Monitoring Food Affordability Reference Document (2018).

Process to estimate the cost of a nutritious basket of food

Toronto Public Health (TPH) has monitored food affordability annually since 1999 using the validated Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey and costing tool. The NFB costing tool, developed by the Ministry of Health & Long-term Care (MOHLTC), was adapted from Health Canada's National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB). The 67 foods items that make up the costing tool reflect a healthy eating pattern based on dietary advice (e.g., 2007 Canada's Food Guide), as well as food consumption data (e.g., 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey - Nutrition). The NFB assumes that consumers have the time and skill to find, purchase and prepare the least expensive options. It does not include processed convenience foods, snack foods, infant food, special dietary foods or specific ethno-cultural foods, and does not include non-food items (such as laundry detergent, soap, toilet paper, etc.) that tend to be purchased when buying groceries.

As per the Nutritious Food Basket Protocol (2014)[1] TPH staff visit 12 grocery stores selected based on store type and geographic location to achieve an approximated representative sample. Store visits take place within the first two weeks of May to improve year-to-year data comparisons. Costing data is entered into an excel spreadsheet to calculate the weekly cost of the NFB for a series of age and sex categories. This information is then used to determine the change in the cost of healthy eating. Store name, location, and individual food costing data remain confidential.

Use of the Nutritious Food Basket results

The NFB is not intended as a budgeting tool. Its strength lies in the ability to track changes in the cost of food over time. The NFB findings are best viewed in relation to income and basic household expenses as this helps to determine the food insecurity risk in vulnerable populations (see Attachment B). TPH uses the NFB results to support a variety of activities, such as assessment and surveillance, reporting, resource development and advocacy.

Canada's Food Guide and the NFB

With the release of the new Canada's Food Guide, the types and proportions of food included in the most current NNFB, and therefore NFB have become outdated. Without a defined dietary pattern for age and sex groups it is not possible to update the NFB costing tool or protocol reflective of the new Canada's Food Guide. At this time, the NFB remains one of the best costing tools available, therefore it is still commonly used by Ontario PHUs to monitor food affordability.

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[1] Ministry of Health & Long-term Care. Nutritious Food Basket Protocol. 2014

Toronto Nutritious Food Basket Results 2009 – 2019

Year	Toronto Weekly Cost Reference Family of Four	Toronto Monthly Cost (weekly cost x 4.33)	Toronto Change from previous year
2009	$164.18	$710.90	base year
2010	$165.19	$715.28	0.6%
2011	$172.84	$748.40	4.6%
2012	$175.99	$762.04	1.8%
2013	$183.10	$792.82	4.0%
2014	$193.05	$835.91	5.4%
2015	$195.65	$847.16	1.3%
2016	$198.34	$858.81	1.4%
2017	$197.55	$855.39	-0.4%
2018	$196.20	$849.55	-0.7%
2019	$211.18	$914.41	7.6%

Toronto Nutritious Food Basket Cost Changes by Food Category 2018 - 2019

Food Category	Percent change in cost 2018-2019
Fish	20.33%
Dark green vegetables	17.32%
Other vegetables and fruit	15.16%
Orange vegetables and fruit	12.23%
Milk and milk alternatives	5.76%
Whole grain products	3.43%
Meat, poultry, and legumes	1.72%
Non-whole grain products	1.33%
Fats and oils	-0.75%