



The Cost of Eating Well in Renfrew County and District – 2016

The Nutritious Food Basket

The Nutritious Food Basket survey measures the cost of basic healthy eating. Every year in May, Renfrew County and District Health Unit costs 67 food items in eight grocery stores.

The survey does not include highly processed foods, special dietary foods, infant foods, or essential items for personal care such as shampoo, toothpaste and toilet paper. It does not include the cost of eating out, or extra food for special meals with additional friends or family. The survey assumes that people have:

- Enough time, skills and equipment to prepare meals from scratch
- Access to quality food stores
- Access to transportation for comparison shopping

The survey provides an estimate of the average cost of healthy eating based on Canada's Food Guide. It is **not** designed to be a budgeting tool for individuals, families or organizations.

Highlights from the 2016 Nutritious Food Basket survey

The cost of feeding a family of four in Renfrew County and District was \$198.08/week (\$858/month).

Income scenarios tell the story

Food costing information is used by public health units to monitor food affordability by relating the cost of the food basket to individual and family incomes as shown in **Table 1: Renfrew County and District Nutritious Food Basket Scenarios for 2016**. The survey results show that for many low income households it can be a struggle to pay rent, pay bills and buy enough nutritious food for themselves and their families.

For example, a family of four with one parent earning full-time minimum wage spends an estimated 62 per cent of its income on food and rent alone. Consider the single male forced to apply for social assistance after being unable to find work. After paying rent for a bachelor apartment (\$624/month), he has \$144 left. But, to buy enough nutritious food, he needs \$289. He does not have enough money for food, let alone his other costs of living. Housing and utilities take priority, so struggling people often cut their food budget to cope. This situation is known as household food insecurity – the inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.

Using the Nutritious Food Basket information

Income scenarios illustrate that for low or fixed income households, incomes are too low to pay for food, housing and other costs of basic living. The Board of Health has used the NFB data to advocate for government increases to social assistance and has supported income responses to food insecurity by endorsing the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health Position Statement on Responses to Food Insecurity.ⁱ



Table 1: Renfrew County and District Nutritious Food Basket Scenarios for 2016

Scenarios*	Ontario Works Family of Four	Minimum Wage Earner Family of Four	Average Income Family of Four	Ontario Works Single Parent, Two children	Ontario Works Single Male	ODSP ⁺ Single Male,	OAS/GIS [□] , Senior Female
Monthly Income ¹	\$2,227	\$2,940	\$7,448	\$2,016	\$768	\$1,206	\$1,563
Estimated Rental Housing Cost ²	\$983	\$983	\$983	\$810	\$624	\$622	\$622
Cost of Nutritious Food ³	\$858	\$858	\$858	\$648	\$289	\$289	\$209
% Income for Shelter	44%	33%	13%	40%	81%	52%	40%
% Income for Nutritious Food	39%	29%	12%	32%	38%	24%	13%
What's left for other expenses?	\$386	\$1,099	\$5,607	\$558	(\$145)	\$295	\$732

Other expenses include: heat and hydro; phone, internet and cable; laundry, toiletries and household cleaning products; insurance; transportation (bus pass, taxi or car expenses); clothing; debt payments and banking service charges; non-prescription and prescription drug costs; and, child care and children's school costs.

*Scenarios Composition:

Family of four = 2 adults (male and female ages 31 – 50) and 2 children (boy age 14 and girl age 8)

Family of three = Female (age 31 – 50) and 2 children (boy age 14 and girl age 8)

Single male (age 31 – 50)

Senior female (age 70+)

+ODSP = Ontario Disability Support Program

□OAS/GIS = Old Age Security/Guaranteed Income Supplement

¹ 2016 Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) Income Scenario Spreadsheet developed by North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit, September 2016. Includes all tax benefits.

² Ontario Ministry of Housing: Average Rent by Bedroom Count. Housing data received from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Rental Market Survey, October 2015 data. May or may not include utilities. Available from: <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=15078>. Accessed October 20, 2016.

³ Renfrew County and District Health Unit. Nutritious Food Basket Survey, May 2016.



Food insecurity and Renfrew County and District

Food insecurity is a serious public health issue, with 12 per cent of households in Renfrew County and District being food insecure.ⁱⁱ Adults or children living in a food insecure household could worry about having not having enough to eat, compromise the quality or variety of food eaten, or could go hungry, sometimes for an entire day.ⁱⁱⁱ

When money is tight people are forced to cope by cutting into their food budget. They skip meals or fill up on cheap foods that are not necessarily nutritious. Parents living on low incomes may go without eating to make sure that their children can eat.

Food insecurity negatively affects health

People in food insecure households:

- Have less milk, fruits and vegetables.^{iv}
- Often do not get enough important nutrients such as folate, iron, zinc and vitamin A.^v
- Have poorer mental and physical health, poorer oral health, greater stress, and are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and anxiety.^{vi} Food insecure people may find it more difficult to manage these conditions with diet or may be unable to buy necessary medications.
- If they are children, have increased risk of mental health problems and if they are teenagers, greater risk of depression, social anxiety and suicide.^{vii}
- Are more likely to become a high-cost user of health care.^{viii}

Income based strategies are required

Long-term, income-based strategies that address poverty are needed to help solve food insecurity. Food charity, such as food banks, soup kitchens and emergency food access programs provide temporary relief to some people who are food insecure – but food insecurity does not go away. The majority of food insecure households do not use these or other programs such as community kitchens, food buying clubs or community gardens.

Community food programs may help to address public health issues such as low vegetable and fruit consumption, but they are not an effective solution for food insecurity. A broader and longer-term strategy that addresses the causes of poverty including inadequate income, precarious employment and lack of affordable housing is needed.

Learn about the causes of food insecurity and its impact on health

- PROOF, Research to Identify Policy Options to Reduce Food Insecurity: www.proof.utoronto.ca/
- Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health: [Position Statement on Responses to Food Insecurity](#) (2015)
- Dietitians of Canada (2016): [Position Statement on Household Food Insecurity](#)



Advocate for income responses to food insecurity

Income-based responses to household food insecurity address the root cause, which is lack of money for basic needs within a household. Income responses are typically government policies, pensions, tax exemptions/credits and social assistance programs. Dietitians of Canada recommends a comprehensive approach, including these income-based strategies:

- a. Improved protection for precarious employment and low wages
- b. Improved benefits for low income households
- c. Increased social assistance and disability pension rates
- d. Basic income guarantee
- e. Increased investment in subsidized, affordable and stable housing options
- f. Actions to address the high cost of food in northern and remote regions^{ix}

For more information

Please contact: Renfrew County and District Health Unit

Health Info Line: 613-735-8666 or 1-800-267-1097 or visit www.rcdhu.com

References

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