



# *The Cost of Eating Well in Huron County*

*Annual Report 2008*

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# An Introduction to the Nutritious Food Basket

In May 2008, the Huron County Health Unit surveyed the price of food in six Huron County grocery stores. Survey results provide the Health Unit with a best guestimate of how much it actually costs individuals and families in Huron County to eat a nutritious diet.

The survey is done annually so changes in the cost of healthy eating can be tracked over time. Results also allow us to assess the adequacy of social assistance and minimum wage incomes in meeting basic household needs. This information can form the basis of addressing local poverty and hunger issues through awareness, education, advocacy, and policy development.

The results give the local cost of a Nutritious Food Basket for one week.

This report is intended for people working in social services, industry professionals, and advocacy groups. It can be used to help define the intent of the Nutritious Food Basket survey, to increase awareness of food security issues, and to help advocate for adequate income and food for everyone. This report supports the factsheet that is intended for public use. The factsheet can be found in Appendix A and can be distributed to clients or consumers.

## The Nutritious Food Basket

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A Nutritious Food Basket is a food-costing tool that is a measure of the cost of healthy eating based on current nutrition recommendations. The Nutritious Food Basket is a standardized list of 66 foods that reflects the food-buying patterns of the average Canadian family. The foods include a variety of less expensive choices from the four food groups of Canada's Food Guide. Food prices, from a representative sample of grocery stores, are averaged and used to approximate the cost of a basket of grocery store foods that meets the nutrient needs of different age and gender groups.

Together, the 66 items can be used to prepare a week's worth of meals and snacks that meet Canadian nutrition guidelines for both adults and children. Foods with little nutritional value, like soft drinks and popular snack foods are not included in the survey. Non-food items like dish soap, paper towels, shampoo, other personal care items, and vitamin supplements that many people add to the shopping cart are not included. Restaurant meals and transportation costs associated with grocery shopping are also excluded.

### *Cost depends on Age and Gender*

The Huron County Nutritious Food Basket prices are based on the nutrient needs of people at different stages in

their lives. The cost of eating well is often lower for women than men. Women are generally smaller than men are and need less food to meet their energy and nutrient needs. It is important to remember that even though women may need less food, the foods should be nutrient dense. Pregnant and breastfeeding women have higher nutrient and energy needs compared to women who are not pregnant or breastfeeding.

Children and teens grow rapidly, therefore they have higher energy and nutrient needs relative to their body sizes than adults. A diet that supports the optimal growth and development of children and teens may be a greater volume than the diet needed for adults.

The Weekly Cost of the Nutritious Food Basket In Huron County			
Individual	Age (in years)	Approximate Cost per Week (\$)*	
		Male	Female
Child	1	16.39	16.39
	2-3	17.46	17.46
	4-6	23.24	23.24
Pre-teens and Adolescents	7-9	27.67	26.43
	10-12	34.18	31.51
	13-15	39.68	33.64
	16-18	45.85	31.74
Adults	19-24	43.24	32.34
	25-49	41.70	30.75
	50-74	37.70	30.11
	75 +	34.30	29.29
Pregnancy: Trimester 1 Trimesters 2, 3 Lactation	13-15	36.97	
		39.00	
		40.29	
Pregnancy: Trimester 1 Trimesters 2, 3 Lactation	16-18	36.61	
		39.44	
		40.57	
Pregnancy: Trimester 1 Trimesters 2, 3 Lactation	19-24	35.81	
		38.24	
		39.25	
Pregnancy: Trimester 1 Trimesters 2, 3 Lactation	25-49	34.33	
		36.45	
		37.28	

\*Five per cent has been added to the figures to cover the cost of miscellaneous items used in everyday meal preparation such as spices, baking supplies, tea and coffee.

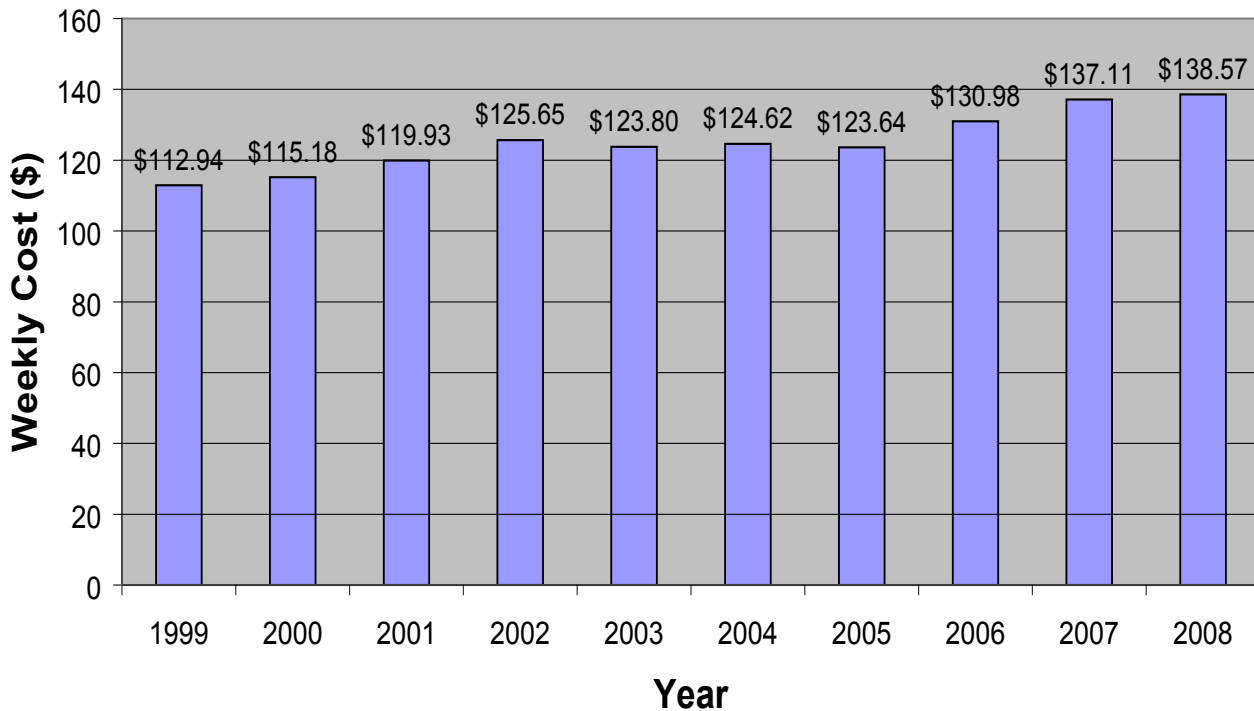
Nutritional needs vary by age, gender, growth, and lactation and the weekly food costs reflect these differences. Canada's Food Guide (below) helps to illustrate these differences, as the number of servings in each food group is dependant on the age, gender, and life stage. Pregnant and breastfeeding women need an extra 2-3 Food Guide Servings per day.

Age in Years	Children			Teens		Adults			
	2-3	4-8	9-13	14-18		19-50		51+	
Sex	Girls and Boys			Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males
Vegetables and Fruit	4	5	6	7	8	7-8	8-10	7	7
Grain Products	3	4	6	6	7	6-7	8	6	7
Milk and Alternatives	2	2	3-4	3-4	3-4	2	2	3	3
Meat and Alternatives	1	1	1-2	2	3	2	3	2	3

# Trends over Time

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## Annual Comparison of the Weekly Cost of Feeding a Reference Family in Huron County, 1999-2008



*Note: A reference family is a family of four ⇒ man + woman, each 25-49 years old; one girl, 7-9 years old; and one boy, 13-15 years old.*

# Specific Trends

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The graph illustrates the changes that have occurred in food prices over the past nine years in Huron County. Since 1999, food costs have increased by 22.7% to feed a reference family of four. Comparing this year to last, there has been a 1.1% increase in food costs. The cost of milk products, meat alternatives, and grain products increased during this time period, while the cost of meat, poultry, and fish, and fats and oils has decreased. Fruits and vegetable prices have remained relatively stable from 2007 to 2008.

# Calculating Weekly Food Costs for Households

People can use this information to estimate the weekly cost of a nutritious diet for their household. An example is provided below.

## Step 1:

Write down the sex and age of each person.

## Step 2:

Using the chart on page 4, write down the weekly food cost for each person.

## Step 3:

Add the weekly food costs together and place in subtotal section.

## Step 4: optional adjustment

Adjustments to the cost can be made for smaller or larger groups. The Toronto Social Planning Council suggests using the following adjustment:

If the household has:

- 1 person multiply by 1.15
- 2 people multiply by 1.10
- 3 people multiply by 1.05
- 4 people make no change
- 5 people multiply by 0.95
- 6+ people multiply by 0.90

Example		
Sex	Age	Approximate Cost
Man	42	41.70
Woman	39	30.75
Boy	14	39.68
Girl	8	26.43
Subtotal =		138.57
x _____ =		TOTAL Cost/Week 138.57

Your Household		
Sex	Age	Approximate Cost
Subtotal =		
x _____ =		TOTAL Cost/Week

To determine the household's monthly food cost, multiply the household's weekly food cost by 4.33. For example, the Nutritious Food Basket cost for a family of four, including two parents, a 13-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl, is \$138.57 per week or \$600.01 per month.

## Using the Information

Individuals and organizations can use this information to:

- advocate for adequate income and food for everyone
- monitor changes in local food prices over time
- prepare educational resources
- guide individuals for household food budget planning
- increase awareness of food security issues

# Food Security and Insecurity

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Food is very reasonably priced in most parts of Canada, however not everyone can afford to put enough of it on the table. This usually isn't because food prices are too high. More often, it's because the dollars at hand just can't be stretched far enough.

Families receiving social assistance or relying on minimum wage income can spend a significant percentage of their total income on housing. Rent and utility bills are inflexible expenses, but food dollars are not necessarily seen the same way. When more money is needed for basics like clothing, transportation or home maintenance, or if a family emergency arises, dollars originally set aside for food may end up being spent on something else. This means that there's not enough money left for healthy eating.

This is evident when we look at food security rates. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2008).

Food insecurity is evident when one or more of these factors are missing. Identifying food insecurity is important because it gives a rough estimate of the number of people with compromised diets, either with food quality, quantity, or disrupted eating patterns. It is likely that the rates of food insecurity are higher than reported because of the sensitive nature of responding to questionnaires.

Canadian data shows 9.2% of households in 2004 were food insecure. Food insecurity was higher in households with incomes in the lowest (<\$10 000) and lower middle (\$10 000 – \$20 000) categories of household income (Canadian Community Health Survey [CCHS] 2004, Cycle 2.2). It was also higher for those relying on income from social assistance or worker's compensation/employment insurance, as well as for those who did not own their dwellings, and those with children (CCHS 2.2). Lone parent homes, especially when lead by a female lone parent, had a higher prevalence of food insecurity (CCHS 2.2). Rural areas in Canada were less food insecure (7.3%) than urban areas (9.6%) (CCHS 2.2).

Ontario reports 8.4% of households in 2004 were food insecure (CCHS 2.2).

In Huron County less than 4% of residents were food insecure with or without hunger, according to 2005 data (CCHS 3.1 and the Huron County Health Status Report working draft). Food insecurity was much higher for households earning less than \$20 000/year. Fifteen percent of this group were food insecure.



# Affordability of Eating Well in Huron County

Do food costs fit with household budgets in Huron County? The following chart shows five different family scenarios.

Household Characteristics		Family of 4 <sup>1</sup> , Low Income <sup>2</sup>	Family of 4 <sup>1</sup> on OW	Single male, aged 25-49 on OW	Single male, aged 25-49 on ODSP	Single female, aged 75+ on OAS/GIS
Total Monthly Income <sup>3</sup> (\$)	Income	1,516.00	1,084.00	560.00	999.00	1,144.00
	CCTB + OCB	636.00	636.00	0	0	0
	TOTAL	2,152.00	1,720.00	560.00	999.00	1,144.00
Cost of Nutritious Food Basket (\$) (% of income)		600.00 (28%)	600.00 (35%)	181.00 (32%)	181.00 (18%)	127.00 (11%)
Rent Costs (\$) <sup>4</sup> (% of income)		842.00 3 bdr. (39%)	842.00 3 bdr. (49%)	524.00 1 bdr. (94%)	524.00 1 bdr. (52%)	524.00 1 bdr. (46%)
Amount Remaining after Basic Costs (\$) <sup>5</sup>		\$710.00	\$278.00	\$-145.00	\$294.00	\$493.00

OW = Ontario Works

ODSP = Ontario Disability Support Program

OAS/GIS = Old age Security Pension and Guaranteed Income Supplement

1 Family of Four: 2 adults (male and female ages 25-49), 2 children (girl age 7, boy age 13)

2 Income is based on one minimum wage earner, 40 hrs/week, \$8.75/hr.

3 Monthly income does not include GST credits or reductions from Employment Insurance or Canadian Pension Plan.

CCTB = Canadian Child Tax Benefit and OCB = Ontario Child Benefit

4 Rent costs are based on the County of Huron Housing Study: Housing Demand and Supply Analysis, 2006. They include heat and hydro.

5 Basic costs do not include telephone, transportation, clothing, childcare, personal and household care products, school supplies, etc.

# Limitations to the Nutritious Food Basket

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There are some considerations to keep in mind when using the Nutritious Food Basket calculations.

1. The Nutritious Food Basket is based upon a standardized list of foods that represents typical Canadian spending patterns. Therefore, the Nutritious Food Basket information is not reflective of individual food preferences or food purchasing locations, nor is it a recommended shopping list. The Nutritious Food Basket is not reflective of the healthiest food purchasing pattern possible nor is it meant for an individual on a special diet.
2. People spend food dollars in many locations. The percentage of weekly food expenditures in Ontario is in the range of 31% for restaurants and 69% for grocery store purchases. (Average Weekly Food Expenditure per Household, 2001). The Nutritious Food Basket survey includes food purchases from grocery stores only. An individual food cost calculation cannot be used to evaluate food budgeting and purchasing habits, nor can it be used to estimate total, minimum, or maximum food expenditures.

3. This survey was completed in Huron County. These results cannot be compared to food costs in other regions.

## Significance of the Results

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Rising food costs can be a significant hardship for low income residents in Huron County.

In 1995, provincial social assistance rates were cut by 21.6%, while the cost of rent has continued to increase. While there have been increases in social assistance rates in the past 10 years, they have not made up what was cut in 1995.

In 2008, social assistance rates were restructured with the introduction of the Canadian Child Tax Benefit (CCTB). The CCTB is provided to working families and people on social assistance (such as Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program) if they have a child/children aged 0-18 years old. Social assistance rates will no longer include child benefits with the introduction of the CCTB. This decreases the overall rate. However if a family leaves social assistance to work, they will not lose their child benefits. With the restructuring, families on social assistance will lose their back-to-school allowance and winter clothing allowance. With the restructuring, families on social assis-

tance should not be worse off, but they also won't be better off.

Rising cost of essentials, such as food, have a particularly severe impact on people with low and fixed incomes. The shelter component of social assistance does not reflect market conditions. Vacancy rates are low in Huron County and the waiting list for social housing can be four to five years in the larger towns, such as Goderich.

In short, the high cost of housing, low vacancy rates and incomes that have not kept pace with the increased cost of living, combine to make it extremely difficult for low income families to make ends meet. This means that many low income residents are forced to choose between paying the rent and buying food, which results in many people relying on food banks and other emergency food programs to meet basic needs.

For more information about healthy eating on a budget, contact the Huron County Health Unit (519) 482-3416.



# Nutrition

## The Cost of Eating Well in Huron County

creating **healthy** communities  
*together*

September 2008

Each year the Huron County Health Unit does a survey to determine the weekly cost of eating well in Huron County. This survey is called the Nutritious Food Basket. The results show if current minimum wage and social assistance rates can cover basic needs, like a healthy diet.

The Nutritious Food Basket represents the weekly cost of eating well in Huron County. This cost is determined using a survey of 66 food items that reflect Canada's Food Guide and the typical buying patterns of Canadians. In May of each year six local grocery stores are surveyed to find the average cost of these food items.

### What is included in the survey?

The 66 food items in the survey can be used to prepare a week's worth of healthy meals. They are less expensive choices and include:

- fruits and vegetables
- meat, fish, and poultry
- eggs
- dairy products
- bread
- cereal

Five per cent is added to the weekly totals to cover miscellaneous items used in everyday meal preparation.

### What is not included in the survey?

- ♦ convenience foods
- ♦ paper products
- ♦ infant food
- ♦ personal hygiene products
- ♦ cleaning products
- ♦ restaurant or cafeteria food

### How much does it cost to eat well in Huron County?

Results from the 2008 Nutritious Food Basket Survey indicate that it costs **\$138.57** per week to feed a family of four. The family of four consists of:

- ♦ a man and woman aged 25-49
- ♦ a 13-15 year old boy
- ♦ a 7-9 year old girl

This is a one per cent increase from last year. Over the past nine years these food costs have risen by 23 per cent.

### Do Costs Vary for Men, Women, and Age Groups?

Weekly Nutritious Food Basket prices are based on gender and age group. For example, the weekly food cost for a middle aged woman will be less than the cost for a teenaged boy. This is because women are generally smaller and need less food than men, and because teenagers grow rapidly and need more food to support growth.

### Why is the Nutritious Food Basket Useful?

- ♦ It gives us an idea about how much it costs to eat healthy in Huron County.
- ♦ We can keep track of changes in food costs because the survey is done every year.
- ♦ We can determine if current minimum wage and social assistance rates can cover basic needs, like a healthy diet.



### Case Example

Here is a typical scenario for a family of four on the social assistance program Ontario Works:

Monthly Income/Expenses	Family of Four on Ontario Works
Approximate Monthly Income	\$1,720.00
Cost of Nutritious Food Basket	\$600.01
Rent Costs (3 bedroom apartment)	\$842.00
Amount remaining	\$277.99

This family will not have much money left over at the end of the month after paying basic expenses. Costs like telephone, transportation, clothing, childcare, personal hygiene products, and school supplies still need to be paid. Rent is a fixed cost and cannot be changed, so money may be taken from the food dollars to cover these other expenses. This can cause the family to eat a less healthy diet to stretch their dollar.

### How to Stretch your Food Dollar

#### Plan Ahead

- Plan a menu for the week. Sale flyers come out on Fridays, so base your menu on the sale items for the following week.
- Make your grocery list based on your weekly menu.
- Use coupons for items you buy on a regular basis.
- Make use of health unit programs, such as the Good Food Box.
- Connect with other people in your community. Get involved in food buying clubs, collective kitchens, and community gardens.
- Try producing some of your own foods in a small garden.
- Follow Canada's Food Guide and eat a variety of foods from the four food groups.

#### Reduce Waste

- Decrease your food costs by reducing the amount of food that gets wasted.
- Store food properly to prevent waste (especially fruits and vegetables).
- Use leftovers!
- Check your cupboards and freezer and use what you have.

#### Shop Smart

- Buy local and purchase fruits and vegetables that are in season. Check out the Buy Local Buy Fresh Map created by the Huron-Perth Farm to table committee to find a list of local producers
- Shop around: some grocery stores have more competitive prices than others.
- Choose unprocessed foods more often. Processed foods are usually more expensive.
- Buy in bulk or choose the largest package size that you can use before the food goes bad. Single serving packages often cost more per serving than larger packages.
- Read labels and unit prices carefully to make sure you are getting the best deal.
- Don't be afraid to try generic brands, they will likely be more affordably priced.
- Shop wisely! Keep to the outside aisles and stick to your grocery list.

### More Information

#### Pathways to Self-Sufficiency

Pathways is an emergency program that helps low-income families and individuals in Huron County when they are most in need. Please call the Huron County Health Unit at 519-482-3416 or toll free 1-877-837-6143 or Social Services at 519-482-8505 if you have any questions.

