

food for thought

This is one of four summaries of the latest research on key issues affecting our access to safe, nutritious and affordable food.



New Ideas for Healthy Communities: The Link between Food, Health and Prosperity

What we eat and drink has a direct bearing on our health. And our health is critical to the productivity and prosperity of our communities. As British Columbia continues to face a growing epidemic of diet-related chronic diseases, especially among lower-income groups, new solutions are being sought. This summary of recent research on the links between income, food and health is provided as food for thought – for solutions that can enhance the health of people to create a more prosperous BC.

“It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.”

James Thurber

Food Insecurity in Canada

Being food insecure presents a challenge to the simple adage “eat right.” The research consistently shows that, as income decreases, food insecurity – lack of access to nutritious, safe and affordable food – increases. One quarter of Canada’s lowest income groups report severe food insecurity. The three groups that are most affected include:

- single parent families headed by women
- aboriginal peoples, particularly those on reserves, and
- marginally housed and homeless people.

Food Security, Income and Health

Food plays a key role in maintaining health. Canadian research shows that the less nutritious, safe and affordable the food consumed, the poorer the health outcomes. This research also illustrates:

- people who are food insecure tend to consume less fruits, vegetables and milk products – staples for a healthy diet
- children in lower-income households are more likely to have health problems and lower education outcomes
- children and adolescents living in lower-income neighbourhoods are more likely to be overweight and obese compared to middle-income neighbourhoods.



The Cost of Eating in BC

As the cost of food continues to rise, it becomes more difficult to purchase healthier foods, especially for those on lower incomes.

For over a decade, the Dietitians of Canada, BC Division, has been tracking the cost of food in BC. They use Health Canada's "healthy food basket" containing 67 basic food items, to monitor cost of food required by several family types in many communities. In 2009 food costing in 134 randomly selected stores across BC found:

- regional differences where food costs were lowest in the Interior Health region (\$835/month) and highest in the Vancouver Coastal Health region (\$919/month)
- a family of four on median income needed 19 percent of their disposable income (\$53,892/year) to purchase a healthy food basket
- this family on low-wage income needed 35 percent of their disposable income (\$29,496/yr) while
- this same family on income assistance needed 49 percent of their disposable income (\$21,276/year) for a healthy food basket.

Research shows that when housing costs are high, people earning below the median income have much less to spend on food. And when there is less to spend on food, people often choose cheaper, unhealthy foods with a higher caloric value. Homeless or marginally-housed people, who have few or no facilities to prepare or store food, have further challenges to eating healthy.

Physical Barriers to Accessing Food

Research on food security and the built environment – how we design and structure our communities – shows a clear link between a community's access to food and health of the population (see the Research Summary Sheet: *Planting*

Seeds for Solutions: Building Communities with Food in Mind). Lack of full service grocery stores or transportation options create barriers to access, especially for rural and aboriginal communities. Higher-income neighbourhoods tend to have more access to healthy, affordable food than lower-income areas. The research also indicates that lower-income neighbourhoods have a higher proportion of obese people and people with poor health.

Food for Thought

Of the many issues that effect food security, income is one of the more important. Adequate income is necessary for food security and healthier eating. Healthy eating improves health. And, healthy people draw less on expensive healthcare and contribute more to the economy and society. This can help build prosperous societies.

Forty two percent of BC's current budget (March, 2010) is earmarked for health care. Improving access to nutritious, safe and affordable food could play a major role in reducing health care costs while helping to create a more productive and prosperous British Columbia.



Here are some additional resources.

- Food Security Gateway: This web portal provides links to projects, initiatives, organizations and resources to help build a food secure and healthy British Columbia. www.phabc.org/foodsecuritygateway
- Bits & Bytes: A searchable database on community food security. www.bitsandbytes.ca
- The cost of Eating in BC: Low Income British Columbians can't afford healthy food. www.dietitians.ca/pdf/CostofEating2009.pdf

For More Information

This information sheet provides a summary of evidence drawn from current published studies and research papers. Please refer to Chapter 1 of the document *Food for Thought* for detailed information, available on the Provincial Health Services Authority website at www.phsa.ca/PopulationHealth (under Food Security), along with the following research summaries:

- *A Sustainable Harvest: Weathering the Impact of Climate Change on BC's Food Supply*
- *Planting Seeds for Solutions: Building Communities with Food in Mind*
- *Bridging the Gap: Improving the Food Environment for BC Students*