



The Cost of Healthy Eating in Alberta

2015

Prepared by Registered Dietitians at Alberta Health Services with contributions from several Alberta Health Services departments and from stakeholders within other sectors. We wish to thank our numerous reviewers and contributors for their input and support.

How to cite this document: Alberta Health Services. (2017). *The cost of healthy eating in Alberta 2015*. Available from <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/nutrition/if-nfs-the-cost-of-healthy-eating-in-alberta-.pdf>

This document is part of a series that consists of two reports, a backgrounder and three appendices. You can locate all of these documents at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/services/page15189.aspx>

If you have any comments or questions about the information in this document, please contact PublicHealthNutrition@ahs.ca

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THE COST OF HEALTHY EATING IN ALBERTA 2015

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to outline a conservative estimate of the average monthly cost of a basic, healthy diet for all Albertans who are two years of age and older. The report also presents healthy food costs for specific communities and community clusters across the province. Stakeholders from relevant government, health and non-profit sectors can use this data to support initiatives in diverse health and social contexts, such as community assessments and policy development. However, these population-level estimates cannot be used to identify an 'ideal' grocery budget for a specific household because they do not reflect the unique needs of each individual and family in Alberta.

Background

This report shares the average monthly costs of the Alberta Nutritious Food Basket (ANFB) based on food prices collected over a four-day timeframe in specific communities across Alberta during the third week of June, 2015. These amounts represent conservative estimates of 2015 healthy food costs that are organized into the following categories: a reference family of four, pregnant and breastfeeding women and 16 groups specified by age and sex.

What is a nutritious food basket?

The contents of a nutritious food basket represent a basic, healthy diet that would meet the nutrient needs of the general population living within a defined region.^{1,2} The specific items that constitute a nutritious food basket fulfill current nutrition recommendations and reflect the typical food purchasing patterns of the target population.¹ Thus, nutritious food basket prices generate meaningful, population-level estimates of the cost of healthy eating for different age and sex groupings within a particular geographical area.^{1,2} However, these costs do not reflect actual or ideal food expenditures for specific subgroups, households or individuals because a nutritious food basket is a population measurement tool whose design cannot



determine a personalized prescription for a healthy eating pattern.^{1,2} For more information on the history of nutritious food baskets in Canada, please see [Methodology for the Implementation of the National Nutritious Food Basket in Alberta](#).

Measuring food costs with the Alberta Nutritious Food Basket

Alberta Health Services (AHS) and Alberta Agriculture and Forestry (AF) have sustained a longstanding partnership to calculate the cost of the ANFB. The ANFB represents a mix of fresh, frozen and minimally processed foods that Albertans can routinely purchase in full-service grocery stores at any time of the year.³ AHS and AF collect the prices of these food items within a range of representative, full-service grocery stores in approximately 50 communities and community clusters during the third week of June each year. For more details on the ANFB and the food costing process, please see [Methodology for the Implementation of the National Nutritious Food Basket in Alberta](#).

A conservative estimate of healthy food costs for an entire population

The ANFB determines the cost of *one* of many hypothetical combinations of nutritious foods that can promote health for the general population of Alberta; there are countless other permutations that represent a healthy pattern of eating. The ANFB provides population-level estimates that cannot be used to identify an ‘ideal’ grocery budget for a specific household because they do not reflect the unique needs of each individual and family in Alberta.¹ The actual amounts of individual and household food expenses fluctuate due to the influence of one or more of the following factors:

- personal and household food preferences
- ethno-cultural and religious diet considerations
- food allergies or sensitivities
- increased metabolic demands due to physical activity or illness
- recommended nutrition therapy to help manage acute or chronic health conditions
- adequate time, energy, skills and equipment to prepare healthy meals
- regular and easy access to full-service grocery stores

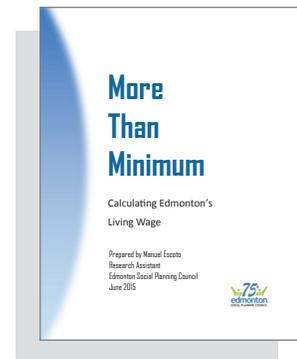
How to apply the results of the Alberta Nutritious Food Basket

The ongoing analysis of food prices is an important public health activity that helps monitor the cost and affordability of a nutritious diet for various population groups. The ability to afford adequate amounts of safe, appealing and nutritious food plays a critical role in supporting Albertans to achieve and sustain optimal well-being. The ANFB methodology produces the most accurate and comprehensive set of data to establish a conservative estimate for the cost of healthy eating across the province each year. ANFB results enable stakeholders from provincial and local sectors to assess the impact of food costs on the health of diverse population groups. ANFB estimates can therefore be used to support various initiatives in diverse health and social contexts.

Key examples of how to apply ANFB calculations appropriately include:

I. Living wage calculations

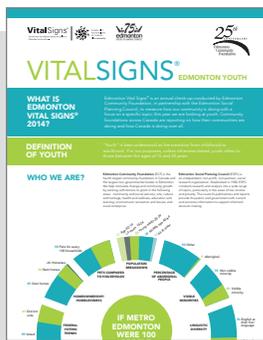
A living wage is an hourly rate of pay that would enable a household to earn enough income to cover basic costs without reliance on government assistance.⁴ [The Canadian Living Wage Framework](#) outlines a method to calculate a living wage for a specific community anywhere across the country. This framework defines basic living needs and emphasizes the use of local data whenever possible to reflect the most precise cost of necessities such as food, clothing, housing, utilities, transportation and social inclusion. The ANFB currently provides the most accurate and consistent estimates of the cost of healthy eating at provincial, municipal and regional levels on an annual basis. Living Wage Canada maintains a current list of all [living wage initiatives in Alberta](#), and some of this work has included local ANFB data.



II. Community assessments

The annual results of the ANFB can support community assessments that require a reasonable estimate of the cost of a nutritious diet within a specified region. Local ANFB data may help stakeholders and decision-makers identify priorities or opportunities for action to improve the livelihood of community residents and populations at risk for poor health outcomes. In recent years, several foundations across Alberta that participate in the work of Vital Signs® Canada have included ANFB estimates in community assessment reports:

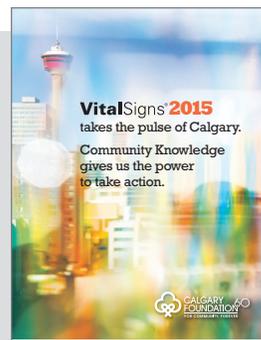
Edmonton 2014



Edmonton 2015

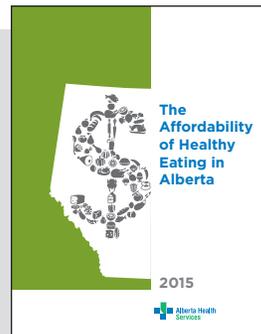


Calgary 2015



III. Analysis of the affordability of healthy eating

The ANFB produces a population measure of food costs that can help analyze the affordability of healthy eating across the continuum of household income levels in Alberta. Affordability is especially relevant for those households that have insufficient financial means to purchase adequate amounts of healthy food. Regular examination of the relationship between food costs and household income can help provide timely insight into the impact of social policy or economic changes on the financial barriers many households face when trying to eat healthy. *The Affordability of Healthy Eating in Alberta 2015* provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between income and the cost of the ANFB for vulnerable Alberta households.



IV. Indicator of healthy food costs

The results of the ANFB offer a single perspective on one of the many factors that influence the well-being of Albertans. Stakeholders from diverse sectors can use ANFB data to represent one of the indicators that they need to inform health and social planning, advocacy and policy. ANFB costs also provide broad approximations to support conversations about realistic and current prices of nutritious food across the province. Health and social service providers can cite ANFB results as a conservative estimate when offering generic guidance to decision-makers, partners or clients who wish to understand the realistic costs of healthy food in Alberta. In this way, ANFB costs can support a respectful discussion of the financial struggles some individuals or households may face when aiming to achieve a healthy pattern of eating.

Cautions on the use of Alberta Nutritious Food Basket results

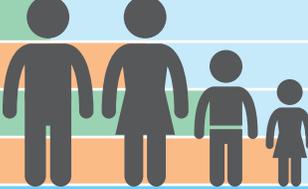
Nutritious food basket calculations pertain to a general population and cannot be applied directly to a specific individual, household, or group. It is important to recognize that ANFB costs cannot be used to:^{1,2}

- pinpoint the least expensive pattern of healthy eating
- create a recommended healthy grocery list
- define an ideal food budget
- design healthy menus or meal plans

Provincial average monthly cost of a healthy diet for Albertans

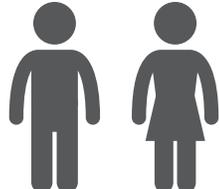
The following data outlines the average monthly cost of healthy eating in Alberta based on prices collected during a four-day timeframe in the third week of June, 2015.

Reference family of four

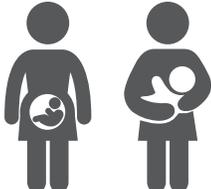
Man	31-50 years old	
Woman	31-50 years old	
Male child	9-13 years old	
Female Child	4-9 years old	
Total	\$1089.54	

Specific age and sex groups

\$152.37	2-3 years old		2-3 years old	\$149.32
\$196.62	4-9 years old		4-9 years old	\$196.62
\$265.82	9-13 years old		9-13 years old	\$225.29
\$391.28	14-18 years old		14-18 years old	\$272.25
Male children and youth			Female children and youth	

\$378.56	19-30 years old		19-30 years old	\$289.97
\$340.36	31-50 years old		31-50 years old	\$286.78
\$328.36	51-70 years old		51-70 years old	\$249.10
\$325.07	71+ years old		71+ years old	\$249.10
Adult males			Adult females	

Pregnant and breastfeeding women

\$308.45	≤ 18 years old		≤ 18 years old	\$319.12
\$312.60	19-30 years old		19-30 years old	\$336.60
\$305.78	31-50 years old		31-50 years old	\$329.79
Pregnant women			Breastfeeding women	

Average monthly cost of a healthy diet in specific communities across Alberta

As a caveat, it is important to exercise caution when using the monthly cost of the ANFB. While it is appropriate to compare the cost within a specific community to the provincial average cost, it would be inappropriate to compare ANFB costs between communities. This can be explained by the fact that the cost of food within communities varies due to considerations such as:

- the amount it costs the grocery stores to transport food products into a community
- the potential for price competition between national, regional, generic, and house brands within and between grocery stores
- the food supply and demand within a community (e.g. larger communities demand larger amounts of foods which may lead to lower costs per unit; certain food items may be more popular in specific regions of the province)

The monthly costs of a healthy diet within several communities and community clusters across Alberta are located on this [map](#).

Contact your local dietitian for more support

Public health dietitians within the AHS Nutrition Services department collaborate with community partners across the province to help address local health and nutrition issues. These dietitians support population health promotion through a number of activities and functions including, but not limited to:

- partnering in efforts to create equitable access to healthy and affordable food
- supporting the development of poverty reduction strategies
- providing a nutrition lens to health surveillance activities
- locating and interpreting relevant evidence and statistical data
- supporting health policy development
- raising awareness of key nutrition issues in the community
- providing education on health and nutrition issues in the community
- supporting community and program development to promote optimal nutrition and health

For more assistance or expertise in locating, interpreting or applying relevant ANFB data, contact your local AHS public health dietitian at PublicHealthNutrition@ahs.ca.

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