

The Cost of Basic Nutritious Food

Can People in Hamilton Afford a Nutritious Diet in 2008?

Many people in Hamilton with a limited income often face the daunting task of choosing between eating well or paying the rent to survive. The increasing cost of living, balanced against the low-income of many individuals and families living on minimum wage or social assistance, does not leave enough money to buy food. The following report discusses the cost of nutritious food, the ways that people cope with a limited income, and some suggestions on how to improve food access in Hamilton.

Balancing Bills and Nutrition

Every year, staff in Public Health Services conduct a survey to determine the average cost of a nutritious diet, as mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care. In 2008, eight local grocery stores were surveyed to find the lowest price of 66 commonly purchased and nutritious foods based on Canada's Food Guide.

The following graph shows a 14.2% increase in the cost of a monthly Nutritious Food Basket over the past five years for a family of four in Hamilton.

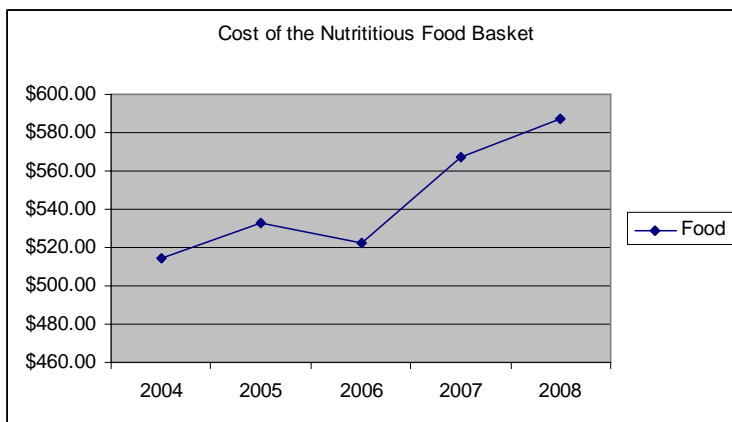


Figure 1. Estimated cost of a monthly nutritious food basket for a family of four: 2 adults (male and female ages 25-49), 2 children (girl age 7, boy age 13) living in Hamilton, each year from 2004 to 2008.

The Nutritious Food Basket does not include convenience foods, snack foods, or other purchases such as toilet paper or dish soap. It also makes the assumption that most people have the skills necessary to prepare and store foods, and does not include eating out or cooking for additional friends or family.

Making Ends Meet

Most people will pay their fixed expenses, such as rent, hydro and heat, first. When money is tight, it is challenging to cover other basic monthly expenses. Some of these necessities may include:

- Telephone
- Transportation
- Toiletries
- Household items
- Medications
- Clothing
- Laundry
- Child care services
- Insurance
- Unexpected expenses



Fixed Income Households

Low-income households in Hamilton often live in rental housing. In 2008, the average monthly cost for a three-bedroom apartment is \$907. For a family of four receiving Ontario Works assistance, this represents 51% of their monthly income. Many individuals and families receiving Ontario Works assistance, Ontario Disability Support Programs or working in minimum wage jobs do not have enough money left to purchase nutritious food on a regular basis.

The following chart depicts the average monthly Ontario Works rates for a family of four, the cost of housing, and the cost of a Nutritious Food Basket over the past three years.

	2006	2007	2008
Monthly Income	\$1,682.71	\$1,710.85	\$1,782.00
Rent	\$881.00	\$903.00	\$907.00
Nutritious Food	\$522.41	\$567.40	\$587.28
What's LEFT	\$279.30	\$240.45	\$287.72

Figure 2. Estimated monthly income, and costs for a family of four (a man and a women age 25-49 years, a girl age 7, and a boy age 13 years) living in Hamilton, from 2006 to 2008.

Many families face a precarious balancing act every day. With the increasing cost of living, small changes in their income or expenses could make the difference between food and hunger.



Our Health

Families and individuals with limited resources may have difficulty accessing healthy, nutritious food. Not being able to afford a nutritious diet can affect health.

Stress & Chronic Disease

Low-income Individuals and families may face increased stress, as they find ways to acquire food to feed themselves and their family. Poor nutrition can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, obesity and diabetes. Individuals may also become more susceptible to infections and colds due to decreased immune function.

Allergies & Special Diets

Specialty items such as gluten-free or milk-free products are often more expensive than regular or no-name items. People with food allergies and health conditions that require specialty foods may have difficulty eating a nutritious diet if they cannot afford the foods they need. Some therapeutic diets can be costly and difficult to afford with a limited income.

Daily Activities & Productivity

When people do not consume an adequate diet, they are often distracted and have a harder time focusing in school and at work. Many studies show that children who skip breakfast in the morning have trouble concentrating at school and are more prone to colds and infections.

Nutrients & Long-term Health

Undernourished individuals may not obtain adequate amounts of key nutrients, such as calcium or folate. If dietary intake is inadequate for an extended period of time, this may have serious health consequences. For example, an adult may increase his or her risk of developing osteoporosis with an insufficient intake of calcium and vitamin D. A pregnant woman with an inadequate intake of folate during the early stages of pregnancy is at an increased risk of carrying a baby with neural tube defects.



Emergency Food Access

In 2008, approximately 51,276 individual hot meals were served from emergency food programs in the City of Hamilton. Food banks, soup kitchens and other emergency food access programs are only a temporary solution for individuals facing poverty and limited access to nutritious food. Challenges faced by emergency food providers include:

- Limited selection and variety of foods due to reliance on donations from the public
- Limited cold storage for fresh vegetables and fruit, milk or meat products
- Restrictions on the amount of foods that can be provided for each client

Working Together Beyond Emergency Food Access

Some community strategies have been initiated to improve access to healthy nutritious food. Community kitchens and community gardens provide people with social interaction and culturally appropriate foods. School nutrition programs offer healthy food for students. These types of programs reach a small number of families in need, and will not by themselves solve the issue of households lacking the income to afford a nutritious food basket. They must be part of a broader strategy, with a stronger social safety net that reduces poverty.

Policy change is necessary for a secure and accessible food system that is available to all.

Building a Better Future

Promoting Long-Term Social Changes

Providing access to all people in Hamilton means promoting positive societal changes. To ensure that future generations have access to safe and nutritious foods, we can advocate for:

- Affordable housing
- Improved employment insurance coverage and benefits
- Increases in minimum wage and social assistance to adequately meet the needs for food and shelter
- Accessible and affordable child care



How Can You Help?

Learn more about poverty issues and hunger in your community

Look for ways to support access to food, like volunteering in community gardens, community kitchens, good food box programs, or school nutrition programs.

Listen to the experiences of clients using emergency food programs

Lead in advocating for societal change like increased minimum wage and social assistance for those in need



Nutritious Food Basket 2008

Weekly Cost in Hamilton, Ontario in 2008

Age & Gender		
Child	1	\$ 16.06
	2-3	\$ 17.06
	4-6	\$ 22.63
Boy	7-9	\$ 26.90
	10-12	\$ 33.38
	13-15	\$ 38.94
	16-18	\$ 45.15
Girl	7-9	\$ 25.69
	10-12	\$ 30.70
	13-15	\$ 32.75
	16-18	\$ 30.87
Man	19-24	\$ 42.48
	25-49	\$ 41.02
	50-74	\$ 37.03
	75+	\$ 33.60
	Woman	19-24
	25-49	\$ 29.98
	50-74	\$ 29.37
	75+	\$ 28.60
Pregnancy		
Age 13-15		
	Trimester 1	\$ 36.21
	Trimester 2-3	\$ 38.29
	Lactation	\$ 39.50
Age 16-18		
	Trimester 1	\$ 35.91
	Trimester 2-3	\$ 38.77
	Lactation	\$ 39.86
Age 19-24		
	Trimester 1	\$ 35.08
	Trimester 2-3	\$ 37.53
	Lactation	\$ 38.51
Age 25-49		
	Trimester 1	\$ 33.58
	Trimester 2-3	\$ 35.72
	Lactation	\$ 36.52
Family of four		\$ 135.62

"Family of four" represents the standard provincial comparison:
2 adults (male and female ages 25-49 years), and
2 children (girl age 7, boy age 13)

Resources

www.hamilton.ca/nutrition
www.FoodNetOntario.ca
www.hamiltonfoodshare.org/
www.hamiltonpoverty.ca/

Your Nutritious Food Basket!

How to Calculate Your Weekly Cost

1. Write down the age and gender of each person you are feeding.
2. Using the table on the left, write down the cost per week for each person.
3. Add all the costs together for a subtotal.
4. Adjust the subtotal based on how many people you are feeding:
 - 1 person – multiply by 1.15
 - 2 people – multiply by 1.10
 - 3 people – multiply by 1.05
 - 4 people – multiply by 1
 - 5 people – multiply by 0.95
 - 6 people – multiply by 0.90
5. To find out the monthly costs, multiply your total by 4.33

"Example" Nutritious Food Basket Cost		
Gender	Age	Cost
Man	35	41.02
Woman	32	29.98
Boy	13	38.94
Girl	7	25.69
Subtotal		135.63
Adjustment x 1.0 = TOTAL		135.63

Your Weekly Nutritious Food Basket Cost		
Gender	Age	Cost
Subtotal		
Adjustment x ____ = TOTAL		