

Making Wise Choices Where we Live, Work and Play



The weigh it is...

There has been a rapid increase in the weight of Canadian adults over the past 15 years. According to Statistics Canada, almost 25% of Canadian adults are at a weight that negatively impacts their health. How did we get here... to our nation's expanding waist line crisis? Health experts believe this is a very complex issue, influenced by many factors. Making wise food choices is an important part of the picture.

However, making wise food choices is not as simple as it might seem. Personal preferences, cultural background, family income, skills and where we live, all affect our food choices. Social influences are also important as our family, friends and co-workers all play an important role in our attitude and behaviour about food choices. A key factor in making healthy food choices is the physical environment in which we live, work and play. There are barriers in today's environment that promote intake of unhealthy food choices. We can't expect the environment to change overnight, especially when it has taken several decades to reach this point! However, if Canadians become more aware of the critical role the environment plays in impacting our food choices, it will be an important first step.

So what are some of these barriers?

Lack of access to healthy food choices.

If healthy food is not accessible or affordable, then it's more difficult to eat well. When healthier food choices are available from vending machines, cafeteria or brought from home, we can improve the quality of what we eat.

Food is everywhere.

Food is available everywhere we go – gas stations, vending machines, department stores, movie theatres etc. As such we are continually exposed to visual cues that encourage us to eat. It's no wonder that millions of busy Canadians often succumb to the availability of low-cost, time saving foods and choose to eat these foods rather than cooking at home.

Food advertising.

Advertisements for pop, candy, high fat snacks and large portions of fast foods are everywhere. In the US, billions of dollars are spent on advertising these foods compared to only millions spent to promote healthy eating campaigns. Canadians are also heavily influenced by exposure to US advertising through television and print media.

Portion sizes are too big.

Many foods and beverages bought in restaurants come in huge portions! Food and beverage portion sizes have increased drastically, and in some cases tripled over the past 15 to 20 years. When portion sizes are large, people tend to eat more food. This makes it hard to listen to the body's 'hunger' and 'full' signals with tempting offers of "all-you-can-eat" and "two for one".

Trusted advice from dietitians. www.dietitians.ca

Making it easy to make wise food choices

Many Canadians want to make wiser food choices. To do so, we need to create environments that support healthy eating where we live, work and play.

At home

- Start by stocking up cupboards and fridges with healthy food choices. Read food labels to ensure the foods purchased are indeed healthy choices. So when you need a “grab and go” meal or snack solution, it is right at the finger tips.

At the office

- Access to vending machines, stocked with healthy food options can satisfy hunger and provide energy when needed. Make recommendations to your supervisor to look into making some changes to vending machines at the office.
- Create a “good food box” for the office and fill it with healthier choices, like dried fruit mix with nuts, rice crackers with peanut butter, canned or fresh fruit.

Eating out

- Get to know healthy cooking methods and ask lots of questions about what is in the menu items.
- Larger portion sizes encourage intake of more food than really needed. Perhaps take a portion of a meal away for
- another day. We no longer need to “finish what’s on the plate”.

Active living: healthy eating’s best friend!

Canadians need environments that encourage active living to meet daily physical activity requirements for health. Over time, it has become easier to do less physical work to accomplish day to day tasks. Ride on lawn mowers, remote controls, cell phones and computers are examples of technologies that promote sedentary behaviours. You don’t even need to get out of your car to order large meals and snacks! Work place norms such as working through lunch hours, inaccessible stairwells, unsafe pathways or lack of change room facilities for active commuters are also examples of barriers to active living.

There are many ways to encourage active living where we live, work and play:

- ✓ Be an advocate for walkable neighbourhoods. People with access to safe and convenient places to be active in are more likely to be physically active.
- ✓ Explore the outdoors instead of turning on the computer, television, or watching a movie.
- ✓ Find a ‘buddy’ to be physically active with. Family, friends and neighbours can play an important role in creating a supportive social environment.
- ✓ Spend less time in the car and more time actively commuting - even if it is parking 5 minutes from your normal parking spot.