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Guide to using Community Food Centres Canada's Healthier Eating Charts

Food is powerful. Healthy foods have the ability to heal us. And unhealthy foods have the ability to harm us. Eating appropriate amounts of healthy foods that are high in nutrients helps us maintain a healthy body weight, stabilizes our moods, gives us energy, helps us sleep better, gives our immune system a boost (by controlling or preventing allergies, eczema, other skin conditions, arthritis), benefits our mental health and helps to prevent degenerative diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, arthritis and dementia. People often equate malnutrition with hunger and starvation, but we can also be malnourished from eating too much calorie-dense and nutrient-poor food.

Introduction

CFCC's **Healthier Eating Charts** were developed to provide a practical reference for people participating in food programs that promote healthier food choices, such as community kitchens, cooking workshops and after school programs. The Healthier Eating Charts can also be used by individuals or groups looking for a continuum to identify the healthiest food choices.

The charts recognize that a wide variety of factors affect our food choices, including our budget, tastes, culture and knowledge about foods. Designating foods simply "good" and "bad", "healthy" or "unhealthy," is too simplistic for the real world. The resource is meant to help users understand a range of options in several food categories, raise key healthy eating pointers and issues in each category, and provide knowledge that can gradually help move choices across the spectrum from the least healthy to the healthiest options. We view health with a broad lens, one that looks beyond the single individual or nutrient to take in factors that create the conditions that impact an individual and his/her community. We view food choice in light of impact on community, the environment, the food system and the local food economy.

The Healthy Eating Charts were developed with the guidance of a nutritionist, modified based on feedback from independent nutritionists and dietitians, and informed by credible and recent evidence-based reports and emerging research. Where research is yet inconclusive, they rely on the precautionary principle. And they are not designed to be definitive. Choices are laid out on a continuum that assumes



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that people will fall into different places at different times according to their tastes and resources. They represent an alternative and/or addition to other healthy eating resources, because they are informed by a broad of suite of approaches, including consumer choice architecture, affordability, environmental implications and balanced economies. And while these charts aim to help people make healthier food choices, the resource may not be for everyone; for people with a specific health condition, the best source of nutrition information is from a healthcare provider.

Guide to using the Charts

This guide can be used by food program coordinators, educators, and/or individual users.

There are nine different charts: fruits and vegetables, protein, dairy, fish, grains, fats & oils, beverages, snacks and sweeteners. We have included categories such as sweeteners, beverages and snacks that are not often found in other food guides, pyramids or plate formats, but are known to contribute up to 30% of our daily calorie intakes. Each chart gives information about a food type and why it's an important part of a healthy diet. In each column — left (least healthy foods – eat less often), middle (healthier foods – eat sometimes), and right (healthiest foods – eat most often) — the user will find examples of foods that can be found at grocery stores and markets. The idea is for users to identify where they are currently eating on the spectrum and then make changes in their purchasing, eating and meal planning habits in the different food categories to make moves to healthier — and ideally the healthiest — food choices. Any choice moving in the “right direction” along the continuum is an improvement and deserves to be celebrated! There are no hard rules on specific foods to completely cut out, with the exception of trans fats which are thankfully well labeled for Canadians and therefore easy to avoid. Additional information on harmful/healthful label information, food facts and portion examples are included with each food group. Since food cost is a consideration for many—and many of the highest quality foods are not always the most affordable — the “Best Nutritional Bang For Your Buck” feature provides some suggestions on more affordable food items that have higher nutritional value.

Additional Healthy Food Suggestions: In many cases, the healthiest and most sustainable food options will be those that are local, seasonal, organic, fair-trade and/or humanely raised products, where those options are available and affordable. In this case, “healthy” does not just apply to the benefit of the individual ingesting the food item, but also includes consideration of the health of our food system, the environment, local economies, and sustainable food production and land stewardship practices. More



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information on the food philosophy that underpins our work, please see our [Good Food Rules](#) on our [website](#).

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do you recommend local and seasonal food?

- The definition of local foods varies by region, but it generally means foods that are grown within your province/state. Choosing to purchase local food products helps the economy by supporting local farmers and producers; it is better for health, in the case of produce, as it is picked when it is ripe and delivered more quickly, ensuring maximum taste, nutrient levels and natural colour; and it's better for the environment as your food travels less distance to your table. A rough measure of local foods has been referred to as "100 miles" or "100 kilometres."
- Seasonality of food refers to the time of year when foods are at their peak production (harvest) or ripeness. Purchasing food in season makes it easier to eat locally and can also be less expensive, as the more food available, the lower the cost to the consumer.

What's so great about organic foods? They're so expensive! And how do I even know if what I'm buying IS organic?

- There is evidence—albeit disputed and varying across different types of foods—that eating organically produced food reduces your exposure to pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics and synthetic hormones. Whether or not you believe that the evidence base demonstrates conclusively that organic food contains more nutrients (as some studies suggest) or is less contaminated with pesticide residues, there is strong evidence that farmers and farmworkers who apply pesticides suffer from negative health impacts, and that wildlife and natural pollinator populations are negatively impacted by pesticide and chemical use. It is true that organic food may not be affordable to all. However, we believe that everyone has the right to make an informed choice within the resources available to them—resources which may ebb and flow over time with varying circumstance and priorities. For some, getting access to low-cost organic food can mean joining a community garden or planting a garden or pot in ones backyard or balcony—options which need not increase food budgets.
- In Canada, organic food labeling is regulated by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Products must be 95% organic ingredients to use the Canadian Organic Label. For fruit and vegetables, if there are five numbers starting with a "9" on the PLU code sticker, you are purchasing organic food that is not genetically modified.



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- Additional options like “fair-trade”(a certification that the food business properly benefits farmers and producers) and “humanely-raised” (farm animals raised and slaughtered according to the highest animal welfare standards) are good to consider when making food purchases. However they are based more on personal values and beliefs, rather than direct health benefits to the consumer.

What is the best choice I can make when it comes to choosing between fresh, local, organic/sustainable foods?

- Ideally, you want to include as many of the above options all together in your food choices where you can. But if you had to prioritize based on your budget and what is available, fresh is most important, followed by local, followed by organic/sustainable foods.

What are whole foods?

- Whole foods are foods as they came from nature without changes. Examples of whole foods are carrots, apples, brown rice, fish, eggs and nuts.

What are processed foods?

- Processed foods are foods that been altered in a manufacturing process. You can recognize a processed food as it often comes in a package and has a label with more than one ingredient. Some processed foods are better than others. For example, processed foods with fewer ingredients and natural ingredients that are not complex chemical names are usually better for you. For example, natural peanut butter is mildly processed but made from 100% roasted peanuts with no other ingredients. A more heavily processed food example is peanut or nut butters with added sweeteners (e.g. sugar, maltodextrin, molasses), salt, and hydrogenated vegetable oils.

What are non-foods?

- Non-foods are ingredients in processed foods that have no nutritional value and are not recognized as food or used by the body. What follows are some examples of the many chemicals that can be added to processed foods.
- Trans fats are found in foods like shortening and margarine – this is a transmuted fat molecule made by adding hydrogen that actually changes the shape of the molecule so it no longer fits where natural food fats work in our body. Trans fats contribute to high cholesterol levels in the blood, heart attacks and heart disease.



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- High fructose corn syrup is a chemically modified corn syrup that contains high levels of fructose that is metabolized differently and does not signal the brain that you have eaten – this can lead to over eating and obesity.
- TBHQ (tertiary butylhydroquinone) is a petroleum-based food additive used for artificial colouring. It has been associated with nausea, vomiting, tinnitus (ringing in the ear) and cancer.

What makes processed foods an unhealthy choice (as compared to fresh, whole foods)?

- When grains are processed, valuable fibre is often removed. Fibre is needed to help you feel “full,” and helps eliminate metabolic waste and toxins from our bodies. We are more prone to disease with a low-fibre diet.
- Up to 90% of minerals are stripped out of refined carbohydrates. When we convert grains into pastas and breads we lose much of the vitamin and mineral content. Vitamins and minerals are important for long-term health and in the short term help learning and athletic performance, support the immune system and maintain mental health.
- Anti-oxidants are lost during food processing, reducing our ability to repair our cells and tissues, making us more susceptible to cancer, other degenerative diseases and the aging process.
- Artificial preservatives, colours and flavours are added to many processed foods. These additives are often petrochemical-based and may be carcinogens, immune suppressors and hormone disruptors. Food additives have been linked to food allergies, asthma and attention deficit disorders. A general guideline (and there are exceptions) is that if you cannot easily recognize or pronounce an ingredient, or a food label contains more than five ingredients, you should avoid it.
- Processed food can contain altered fats. When fats are cooked at high temperatures such as deep-frying or modified for shelf life of packaged food, oils and fats chemically change. Altered fats block our cells from taking up the necessary oxygen and nutrients through our cell membranes – this can make us feel tired and is also a leading cause of heart disease. On a food label altered fats will be indicated as “modified”, “hydrogenated” or “partially hydrogenated.”
- Processed foods also contain added sodium (salt) and sugars, which can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and Type 2 diabetes.
- Processed foods can be heavily packaged and wrapped which can be harmful for the environment. Some packaging or liners can contain hormone disruptors like BPA, and this can be harmful to our health.



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I already spend a lot of my income on food. Are you suggesting I should spend more? I just don't think I can afford it.

- Making the best food choices is an important investment for your health. For some, it may be about placing a higher priority on quality and nature of food purchasing and meal planning.
- For those who are up against the absolute limits of low income, we recognize that all you can do is maximize the value you get from the resources available to you. That might take the form of asking for choice at the food bank, seeking out healthier community meals, or growing fruits and vegetables in a community garden, home garden, or containers to get some less expensive, organic food.
- Waste management is also an important part of the food cost equation. Food skills training and food safety knowledge can go a long way in lowering food waste and cost.
- “Over the course of a year, paying an additional \$1.50/day more for eating healthy diet would increase food costs for one person by about \$550 per year. The difference is very small in comparison to the economic costs of diet-related chronic diseases, which would be dramatically reduced by healthy diets.” *D. Mozaffarian, Harvard School of Public Health.*

I'm confused by conflicting reports of research findings around nutrition: one day chocolate is life-saving, the next it is bad for me again. Same with coffee and wine and eggs — the list goes on. What am I supposed to take away from this?

- Food news can be very confusing for the consumer – the keys to keep in mind are eating in moderation (watching your portion/serving size and frequency), eating a variety of nutritious foods and avoiding foods that have little to no nutritional value (also known as “dead foods,” “junk foods,” “empty-calorie foods,” or “non-foods”).
- Some food guides or diets can be very confusing, difficult to sustain over time, unrealistic, and may assume individuals are also getting recommended amounts of daily activity.
- Good, basic nutrition information is available from resources such as Health Canada’s Food Guide, The Harvard Medical School’s Healthy Eating Pyramid and Healthy Eating Plate and through organizations like the Dietitians of Canada.



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It's difficult to talk about nutrition without discussing diet trends. What diets are good and what diets should I stay away from?

- Making healthy changes to your diet is not necessarily “dieting” or cutting out certain groups of foods or focusing on specific individual nutrients.
- The most important consideration in making changes to how or what you eat, is that the change is sustainable (meaning you can see yourself eating this way on a long-term basis). Many diets or diet trends have some proven short-term value (most commonly around weight loss or loss of body fat) but longer term health impacts and risks have yet to be proven.
- Eating the right amount of a variety of nutritious foods that you enjoy is the healthiest way to go in the long-term.
- To quote Michael Pollan’s basic food rules:
 - Eat “real” food – avoid processed foods.
 - Not too much – pay attention while you are eating, listen to your body to know you are “full”, snack appropriately.
 - Mostly vegetables – half of Canadians do not eat enough fruits and vegetables every day. We can and should do better!

Eating all these whole foods seems to take a lot of time and skill. To be honest, I don't know how to cook/don't like cooking/don't have time to cook. How important is home cooking really?

- In our busy day to day lives, preparing and cooking your own meals from scratch is not necessarily everybody’s idea of a good time! However, learning the most basic food handling, cooking, preparation and storing skills opens up many more options for healthier (and safer) eating.
- Increasing your confidence in the kitchen can range from learning to read recipes, choosing healthy ingredients, using different herbs and spices, or simply trying foods you’ve never tried before.
- And healthy eating is not limited to what you eat or prepare at home – consider using the Healthy Eating Charts to help you make better choices at restaurants or your next family dinner!
- Eating raw fruits and vegetables is by far the easiest first move for healthier eating and can be done with little preparation, skill or time and money costs.



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Additional Information/Resources

- + [CFCC's Good Food Rules](#)
- + [Overview of Michael Pollan's Food Rules](#)
- + [Harvard Food Pyramid and Plate](#)
- + [Brazil's food-based dietary guidelines](#)
- + [Harvard School of Public Health Information on Healthy Fats](#)
- + [The Environmental Working Group's Clean 15 and Dirty Dozen fruits and vegetables](#)