

Food Affordability & Food Insecurity in Algoma

The 2023 Nutritious Food Basket Results and Recommendations



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What is the Nutritious Food Basket?

Each year, Algoma Public Health (APH) conducts the Ontario Nutritious Food Basket (NFB) survey to determine the cost of healthy eating for families and individuals in Algoma.

The NFB is comprised of 61 food items based off the National Nutritious Food Basket developed by Health Canada, which was updated in 2019 to be consistent with Canada's Food Guide. NFB data collection, management, and interpretation is led by Algoma Public Health Registered Dietitians (RD), with assistance from an RD-trained food surveyor (typically a dietetic student).

The NFB costing is conducted each year in May at eight full-service grocery stores across Algoma. The grocery stores are a representative sample of Algoma grocery stores based on population and geographic distribution, including a mix of premium and discount stores. The costing is completed in-person or online.

Limitations of the NFB

The NFB is not intended for use as an individual or household meal planning or budgeting tool. The NFB also makes the following assumptions:

- People have the time, ability, skills, space and equipment to prepare meals from scratch
- Food is always chosen based on the lowest available price
- People have access to grocery stores and can grocery shop regularly



Further, the NFB is not inclusive for all religious and cultural groups, including Indigenous Peoples, as it does not reflect the full spectrum of ingredients, preparation, or procurement practices. Algoma Public Health recognizes this as a limitation of this data.

2023 Nutritious Food Basket Results

The 2023 NFB data indicates that the estimated monthly cost of eating for a single individual is \$423.32 and the estimated monthly cost to feed a sample family of four is \$1180.92 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The monthly cost of eating well in Algoma.

It is important to note that while the NFB does include an additional 5% cost to cover miscellaneous foods, such as spices, coffee, tea, and baking supplies, it does not include infant food or formula, or food for special diets (ex. gluten-free). Further, the NFB does not include cleaning and personal hygiene products such as toothpaste, shampoo, toilet paper, menstrual products, and dish soap. Therefore, this data likely underestimates the money needed to obtain essential items.

In 2019, the NFB survey was updated to reflect the new Canada's Food Guide and allow for online costing of validated grocery stores. For this reason, the 2022 and 2023 data are not comparable to years prior to 2019. However, from May 2022 - May 2023, the monthly cost of the NFB for a family of four increased by 7% (Figure 2).

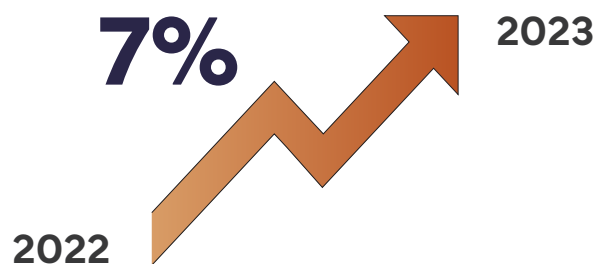


Figure 2. Year over year increase from 2022 to 2023 in the NFB monthly food cost for a family of four.

Assessing Food Affordability

It is important to interpret the NFB data alongside household income to assess food affordability. Food affordability is defined as the economic sufficiency to procure an adequate diet that meets nutrient needs with safe and acceptable foods¹. Food affordability is influenced by market forces and impacts food availability and food insecurity¹.

The household income scenarios were developed by Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH) to provide real-world context for the cost of food. For each income scenario, local public health agencies use the monthly cost of food and the average rental costs for their region to determine how much money is left over each month for other essential expenses, such as childcare, transportation, and household bills.

Housing is a basic cost that makes up a large part of a household's fixed monthly budget. The average rental cost for Algoma has been obtained from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)² and adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index³. Algoma Public Health conducted additional market research to assess how well the adjusted CMHC data represents the current local rental market, and initial findings suggest it underestimates current rental prices by as much as **35-50%**. Please consider these limitations when evaluating the income scenarios, as the amount left over for other expenses is likely overestimated.

NFB Income Scenarios for Algoma in 2023

The Current Situation

	Family of Four ⁱ on Ontario Works	Single Parent with two Children, on Ontario Works	Single Person on Ontario Works	Single Person on ODSP	Single Pregnant Person, ODSP	Single Person, Old Age Security/ Guaranteed Income Supplement
Monthly Income ⁱⁱ	\$2821	\$2587	\$882	\$1386	\$1426	\$2010
Average Monthly Rent ⁱⁱⁱ	\$1220	\$1091	\$718	\$718	\$916	\$916
Monthly Cost of Food ⁱⁱⁱⁱ	\$1181	\$870	\$423	\$423	\$423	\$306
% of Income Required to Purchase Healthy Food	42%	34%	48%	31%	28%	15%
Amount leftover for other expenses ⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱ	\$420	\$627	-\$260	\$46	\$108	\$787

i Family of four: two adults aged 31-50, one male aged 14, and one female aged 8.

ii Based on Ontario averages and includes benefits, such as the Canadian Child Benefit.

iii Based on CMHC data² and adjusted using the Consumer Price Index³. Algoma Public Health conducted additional research to assess how well CMHC data represents the current rental market, and initial findings suggest an underestimation of rental prices by as much as 35-50%. Consider these limitations when evaluating the income scenarios.

iiii Calculated using the 2023 Nutritious Food Basket collected by Algoma Public Health.

iiiii Other expenses may include daycare, transportation, hygiene and cleaning products, heat/water, internet, phone, etc.

Table 1. Nutritious Food Basket Income Scenarios for Algoma, 2023.

NFB Income Scenarios for Algoma in 2023

In Table 1, several scenarios indicate that social assistance rates are not sufficient to pay for rent, food, and other household necessities. A single individual collecting Ontario Works would be in debt of \$260 each month after paying for food and rent. A single parent with two children on Ontario Works would only have \$627 leftover to cover essential expenses like transportation, childcare, medications, heat and hydro, internet, etc. In all the income scenarios highlighted in Table 1, households are spending between 15-48% of their income on food.

Income Scenarios	Amount leftover after rent and food
Single parent with two children on Ontario Works	\$627
Family of four on Ontario Works	\$420
Single person on Ontario Works	-\$260
Single pregnant person on ODSP	\$108



Clothing



Heat & hydro



Hygiene products



Personal care products



Childcare



Transportation



Phone & internet services



Cleaning products



School supplies



Medications



Home furnishings

Figure 3. Amount leftover after rent and food to pay for other expenses.

NFB Income Scenarios for Algoma in 2023

Family of 4 on Ontario Works		
	2022	2023
Total monthly income	\$2780	\$2821
Monthly rent (3 bedroom apartment)	\$1144	\$1220
Food (Nutritious Food Basket)	\$1100	\$1181
Money left for other expenses	\$536	\$420
% Income required for rent	41%	43%
% Income required for food	40%	42%



Table 2. Income scenario for a family of four on Ontario Works from 2022-2023.

The amount leftover after rent and food for a family of four on Ontario Works has decreased from \$536 in 2022 to \$420 in 2023 (Table 2). This indicates that food and housing have become even less affordable.

Food Insecurity in Algoma

For many households in Algoma, healthy eating is simply not affordable. Food insecurity is defined as “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.”⁴ Experiences of food insecurity exist on a spectrum from marginal to severe.

Marginal: worrying about running out of food and/or having a limited selection of food

Moderate: not eating an adequate quality or selection of food

Severe: not eating an adequate quantity of food or, at the most extreme, not eating for a whole day or more due to lack of money

Food insecurity is an urgent public health issue. People living in food insecure households are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health conditions, leading to greater need for healthcare services, higher rates of hospitalization, and elevated risk of premature death⁴. Children in food insecure households are more likely to have poorer overall health, including greater risk for bone fractures, asthma, and mental health conditions such as social anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation⁴.

Food insecurity is a sensitive marker of material deprivation, as the deprivation experienced by households who are food insecure often extends beyond food. This financial stress can contribute to poor mental health outcomes, such as heightened stress and anxiety.

Recent data for Canada indicates that food insecurity is the highest it has been since Statistics Canada began monitoring food insecurity in 2005⁵. From 2021 to 2022, the prevalence of household food insecurity across the ten provinces rose from 15.9% to 17.8%⁵.

In Algoma, the trend is similar. From 2020-2022, the prevalence of household food insecurity in Algoma was 19.4% or approximately 1 in 5 households⁶. The full extent of food insecurity in Algoma is likely worse, as Indigenous Peoples living on-community are not included in data collection⁵. There are 8 First Nations communities across Algoma⁷.

Who is Most Likely to Experience Food Insecurity?

The risk of food insecurity is higher in the following household types⁴:

- Female lone-parent households with children under 18 (approx. 14% of Algoma households⁸),
- Individuals with employment insurance (approx. 11%⁸) or social assistance as the main source of income (approx. 8%⁹),
- Those living in rental housing (approx. 28% of Algoma households¹⁰).
- As a result of systems of oppression, certain racial/ cultural groups, notably Black and Indigenous households (approx. 15% of Algoma households^{8,10}).

Did you know?

Having a job does not guarantee food security. Nearly 60% of Ontarians experiencing food insecurity have income from employment⁵.

Reducing Food Insecurity Using Income-Based Strategies

Food charities (ex. food banks) help provide temporary and emergency hunger relief for those who can access them. Often, a food charity's capacity and reach are limited. Research indicates that only about 20% of those experiencing food insecurity access charity-based food supports³. There are many complex factors that make accessing these supports challenging for a community member, including transportation, health-related dietary needs, religious and personal preferences, as well as operational limitations (hours, location, supply, & personnel)³.

Alternative strategies must be pursued to achieve food security for all. There is strong evidence that food insecurity can be reduced through income-based solutions. By improving the financial circumstances of low-income households, people are enabled to spend their money in ways that improve food security with dignity.

Addressing Food Insecurity in Algoma

Food is a basic human right. Every Algoma resident deserves dignified access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods.

To have a meaningful impact on improving food insecurity, there is a need for evidence-based policy responses focused on adequate income and social assistance rates⁴. Here's what you and your organization can do to help.

Actions that individuals can take:

- **Learn more about food insecurity.** Become a well-versed advocate for effective food insecurity solutions by increasing your knowledge.
 - [Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2022 - PROOF](#)
 - [Ontario Dietitians in Public Health – Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity](#)
 - [Addressing Household Food Insecurity in Canada – Position Statement and Recommendations from Dietitians of Canada](#)
 - [Indigenous Food Insecurity - PROOF](#)
- **Spread the word.** Share the reality of food insecurity in Algoma and the necessary income-based solutions with your family and friends.
- **Volunteer at or host a free tax clinic.** Volunteer your time and skills to a local [Free Tax Clinic](#) and help eligible individuals receive the benefits they are entitled to.

Actions that organizations can take:

- **Become a living wage employer** through the Ontario Living Wage Network. Paying a living wage can help employees meet their needs and allow them to participate in their community.
- **Advocate for better income policy, including a basic income.** A basic income guarantee ensures everyone receives sufficient income to live with dignity. Learn more at [Basic Income Canada Network](#).
- **Help foster economic resilience for individuals at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity.** Provide targeted support for access to and training for jobs with livable wages and benefits.

Food Insecurity Case Scenarios

Read the following scenarios to put yourself in the shoes of someone experiencing food insecurity in Algoma.

Algoma Case Scenario #1: Meet Brianna

Brianna was born and raised in Elliot Lake. She moved away for college and to gain work experience, but as she grew up and felt ready to start a family of her own, she moved home to be closer to her parents and childhood friends. Brianna had a job she was proud of working at a local business, but she lost her job when the business closed during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Since then, Brianna has worked a variety of unstable, temporary jobs, but relies on Ontario Works as her main source of income.

Brianna has two young children, an 8-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy. Both are quickly growing out of last season's clothing. Brianna's daughter is begging her to join a dance class. With help from her parents, Brianna was able to enroll her son in hockey again this year, but he is quickly outgrowing his old equipment and driving him to all his games and practices costs a lot in gas.

Brianna would love to go back to school for a more stable career, like nursing, but at the end of each month after paying rent (\$1091) and food (\$870) for her family, she only has \$627 left over to cover heat and hydro, clothing, household essentials, phone bill, medications, and transportation costs.

Algoma Case Scenario #2: Meet Brian

Brian is a 35-year-old male living in Sault Ste. Marie. After graduating from Sault College, Brian quickly got a job that he loved. After working there for 5 years, Brian suffered a back injury at work that left him with chronic pain. Brian is unable to work due to his chronic pain, which has left him living with depression. Brian has been receiving ODSP since his injury.

Each month, Brian pays his rent (\$718), which leaves him with only \$469. Brian would need to spend \$423 to feed himself well for the month. This would leave him with only \$46 left over to cover basic expenses, including his essential anti-depressant medication. Brian tries to visit a food bank once a month to lessen his food cost, but he still does not have enough to cover heat/hydro, internet, phone, clothing, medications, etc.

Brian wants an online job but can't afford a phone or internet bill to help with his job search. Although Brian knows he needs additional support, he feels embarrassed to ask his parents for money each month and feels stuck in his current situation.

Scenarios 1 & 2 were adapted with permission from Northwestern Health Unit¹⁷.

Food Insecurity Case Scenarios Continued

Algoma Case Scenario #3: Meet Kabir and Harpreet

Kabir loved his job as a high school science teacher in India before moving to Wawa in 2021 with his wife, Harpreet, and two young children (aged 3 and 5). Kabir feels lucky to have found a full-time minimum wage job at Tim Horton's and Harpreet stays at home during the day with their youngest child.

Kabir and his family found an apartment (\$1290/month), but they have had some problems with the condition of the apartment. To feed the family well for the month, food will cost \$1181, which leaves the family with \$1787 leftover (before tax) for essential expenses. This might seem like a decent amount, but it goes quickly after covering all their essential expenses including heat/hydro, phone/internet, extracurricular activities, medications, etc.

Kabir and Harpreet feel as though they are treading water to stay afloat and are currently unable to save for a better apartment. To save money, the family often compromises on nutrition to better their future.

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