

Troubling eating and drinking habits among Ontario children must be addressed through food literacy and policy: OPHA

Two new reports underscore public health challenge that will outlast COVID

Toronto, June 23rd, 2021 – Two new reports released today by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) warn of the long-term health risks to citizens – particularly children and teens – and the resulting impacts on an already stretched hospital system if steps are not taken to reverse unhealthy eating patterns and strengthen food literacy in the province. *Eating in Ontario: What Do We Know?* paints a concerning portrait of food and beverage intakes of Ontarians that increase their risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes and prevent them from getting the nutrients they need for good health. *Beverage Intakes in Ontario: What Do We Know?* reveals that sugar sweetened and diet beverages as well as coffee and tea are replacing more nutritious beverages, especially in the diets of young children.

“These reports should be a wake-up call to policymakers and citizens that Ontarians and especially our children are not getting the nutrition they need to live long, healthy lives,” said Pegeen Walsh, Executive Director of the Ontario Public Health Association. “With a renewed focus on public health prevention strategies, measures to ensure Ontarians have clear and accurate information and education when it comes to what they eat and drink should be quickly adopted.”

The reports highlight a critical need to enhance food literacy in Ontario to protect public health and promote well-being, based on these findings:

- High sodium intake is an issue for all age groups, with a large percentage of the population exceeding the Chronic Disease Risk Reduction Intake (CDRR). Males 14-18 years are consuming the equivalent of three servings of large fries daily.
- Children and adults had intakes of vitamin D and fibre below recommended levels
- Sugar contributed almost 20% of total daily energy intake; total fat contributed 33%
- Dark green and orange vegetables accounted for less than one serving per day for all groups
- Females nine and up and males over 71 may not be getting enough calcium
- Intakes of milk have shown declines and fortified plant-based beverages intakes are low, meanwhile these beverages supply important nutrients such as vitamin D and calcium
- Ontarians are consuming too many sugar sweetened beverages; boys aged two to five years had the highest average consumption of sugar sweetened beverages
- Males and females over the age of 13 years may not be consuming adequate amounts of fluids

The reports (Roblin L, Ng AP, Ahmed M, L'Abbe M, Karbasy K, Gough K) are the first to isolate and consider Ontario-specific data on intakes of key nutrients, vegetables and fruits, and beverages based on

the 2015 Canadian Community Health Survey - Nutrition. This research is intended to inform evidence-based decision making on policies which facilitate healthy eating and prevent chronic disease. The full reports can be read at www.nutritionconnections.ca.

The links between unhealthy eating and beverage consumption and a lack of nutrition with long-term health complications are clear. High sodium consumption is a driver of increased risk of chronic disease; more than 30% of hypertension cases in Canada are due to high sodium intakes. Sodium and potassium intake patterns of children and adults influence long-term health through complex relationships with dietary intakes, blood pressure, and cardiovascular health. Relying on foods and beverages high in fats and sugar rather than high fibre fruits and vegetables and other healthier choices increases the risk of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

There is also a significant societal cost through the public health system. Consider, in 2015, three-quarters of deaths in Ontario were [attributable](#) to chronic diseases. The total direct health care costs and indirect costs (e.g., lost productivity due to disability and premature mortality) in Ontario are estimated to be \$5.6 billion for unhealthy eating and drinking.

Ensuring Ontarians have the tools they need to make informed choices about healthy eating and beverage consumption must also consider where people get their information. According to a [study](#) conducted by Nutrition Connections with Ipsos, the internet is now the primary source of nutrition information for parents of children and youth. To address this and other issues impacting the nutrition literacy gap, the reports recommend the following:

- Include food literacy as a mandatory component of school curriculum at every grade level, including in the training of educators and childcare providers
- Promote guidelines and standards for beverages served in childcare and schools including increasing access to water and restricting the serving of sugar sweetened beverages
- Increase efforts to promote Canada's Food Guide and Canada's Dietary Guidelines to all population groups to increase vegetable, fruit and whole grain food consumption; choose more plant-based protein foods; and limit intakes of processed foods high in fat, salt and sugar
- Provide government sanctioned healthy eating and drinking campaigns targeted to children and the general public
- Continue promotion and education on the use of food labels and nutrition information on menus to enable consumers to make healthy food choices, including decisions surrounding nutrients of concern (sodium, potassium, calcium, vitamin D, fibre, sugar, and fat)
- Reduce marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children overall. Ban the marketing and sale of sugar sweetened beverages in schools and restrict or ban the sale of sugar sweetened beverages in recreation centres frequented by children.
- Mandate the inclusion of sodium on menus in food service premises as part of the Healthy Choices Menu Act legislation, and increase education about the nutrients that increase risk for adverse health, specifically sodium, sugar, and saturated/trans fats

"The reports' recommendations are a road map – or a transit map – to healthier eating," said Ms. Walsh. "Given the right information and encouragement, Ontario's government could support citizens in making good nutritional choices that will prevent disease, maintain quality of life, and protect our public health care system."

About the Ontario Public Health Association

The Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) is a non-partisan, charitable, non-profit organization that brings together a broad spectrum of groups and individuals concerned about people's health. OPHA's members come from various backgrounds and sectors - from the various disciplines in public health, health care, academic, non-profit to the private sector. They are united by OPHA's mission of providing leadership on issues affecting the public's health and strengthening the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario.

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