

Food Security and Diabetes Position Statement

Executive Summary

Food security exists when individuals have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Approximately 4 million people, or 1 in 8 Canadian households, are food insecure. Population groups that are more susceptible to financial constraints and low-income households, including households with lone parents, children, lower levels of education, Indigenous Peoples, and those living in remote regions are more severely affected by food insecurity.

Food insecurity is compounded by various factors, which increases peoples' risk of developing select chronic diseases. Food insecurity is associated with an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes and gestational diabetes and compromising the management of type 1 diabetes and type 2 diabetes through several mechanisms.

People who are food insecure may consume a less diverse diet with more inexpensive foods that are high in energy, sugar, and saturated and trans fats, leading to weight gain and poor glycemic control. People who are food insecure are two times more likely to live with type 2 diabetes than those who are food-secure. The prevalence of type 2 diabetes is known to increase in food insecure households with increasing severity of food insecurity. Further, women who are food insecure are more than twice as likely to develop gestational diabetes than women who are food secure.

Food Insecurity Leads to Increased Risk of Diabetes:

- People who are food insecure may consume a less diverse diet containing more inexpensive food choices that are high in energy, sugar, and saturated and trans fats, leading to weight gain, which is a major risk factor for developing type 2 diabetes and poor glycemic control.
- People who are food insecure are at increased risk of hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia attributable to overeating behaviours during times of food adequacy and undereating in times of food scarcity.
- People living with diabetes (type 1 and type 2) who are food insecure may be forced to make the choice between buying food over other necessities including purchasing medications, devices, and supplies.

Determinants of Food Security:

- **Income:** As household income declines, the probability of food insecurity rises.
- **Employment:** People who rely on precarious employment are twice as likely to face food insecurity as those with secure incomes living in low-income households.
- **Health:** Having poor health increases one's risk of experiencing food insecurity due to being unable to work and/or having additional medical-related expenses.
- **Geographic Location:** Proximity to affordable and nutritious foods impacts food security.

When individuals are food secure, they are more likely to consume a varied and nutrient-rich diet, leading to positive health outcomes including decreasing the risk for overweight and obesity, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes and its complications.

- **Housing Affordability:** Lack of affordable housing is a growing issue that is putting many Canadian households in a state of food insecurity.
- **Newcomer Status:** Newcomers to Canada have an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity when they face difficulties securing employment and accessing healthy and culturally-appropriate foods.

Minimising population-wide levels of food insecurity will require a comprehensive strategy with action at all levels of government to address the underlying social determinants of health which impact the risk of food insecurity. Policies which address the underlying causes of food insecurity include income policies, subsidized housing, and land zoning practices. Some food programs, such as food banks, address the immediate need for food but do little to change the structural issues that contribute to and perpetuate food insecurity. Programs which increase equitable access to nutritious foods are integral to improving food security. Overall, addressing food insecurity will have numerous positive outcomes including decreased incidence of type 2 diabetes, gestational diabetes, and diabetes-related complications.

Recommendations

Diabetes Canada recommends that **municipal** governments:

- Support the development of healthy food environments through the establishment of grocery stores, farmers markets, and fruit and vegetable stands in low-income neighbourhoods.
- Ensure that grocery stores are accessible via safe walking infrastructure or public transit.
- Consider local food banks as emergency solutions to address immediate hunger, but insufficient for providing food security.
- Ensure that recent immigrants are connected to organizations that provide settlement support; helping them find and secure employment, residence, methods of transportation, and other services.
- Increase recent immigrants' knowledge of social services that offer financial support.

- Establish a surveillance mechanism to monitor food insecurity as a social determinant of health, to determine if the problem is worsening or improving, and whether certain population groups continue to be disproportionately impacted.

Diabetes Canada recommends that **provincial and territorial** governments:

- Evaluate the adequacy of minimum wage standards in providing households with an adequate income to support a healthy diet at all times.
- Increase investments in subsidized affordable and stable housing.
- Ensure sufficient income protection for households who rely on precarious employment and low wages.
- Establish a surveillance mechanism to monitor food insecurity as a social determinant of health, to determine if the problem is worsening or improving, and whether certain population groups continue to be disproportionately impacted.

Diabetes Canada recommends that the **federal** government:

- Continue to provide national income benefits for vulnerable populations; reevaluate eligibility criteria, timing, conditions, and amounts to ensure adequacy for all Canadians.
- Consider implementing a national basic income guarantee to provide all Canadians, regardless of employment, with enough money to pay for their basic needs.
- Address the higher cost of food in remote and northern regions of Canada through subsidy programs that encourage the consumption of nutritious and traditional foods.
- Consider implementing a national school food program to supplement a nutritious diet for children and youth.
- Ensure that sufficient funding is provided to provinces to support investments in affordable housing.
- Evaluate the adequacy of Nutrition North in reducing food insecurity in remote northern regions.

- Establish a surveillance mechanism to monitor food insecurity as a social determinant of health, to determine if the problem is worsening or improving, and whether certain population groups continue to be disproportionately impacted.
- Ensure that sufficient funding is invested in innovative health services, policy, and program research focused on supporting and increasing food security in Canada.

Diabetes Canada recommends that **health-care providers:**

- Increase their awareness and knowledge of the role of food insecurity as a social determinant of health.
- Incorporate a food insecurity assessment as part of their patients' clinical assessment routine.
- Identify patients living in food insecure households while they are in a health care setting; and refer those patients and their

families to social assistance and/or food programs.

Diabetes Canada recommends that **Canadians:**

- Advocate to governments to take a comprehensive approach to mitigate the underlying causes of food insecurity.

Diabetes Canada will:

- Work with partners and stakeholders with similar values and goals to promote healthy food environments in Canada.
- Advocate for minimum wage standards and affordable housing to ensure that all Canadians have sufficient income to afford healthy food.
- Continue to contribute to the development of the federal government's Food Policy for Canada and Healthy Eating Strategy.
- Support Indigenous organizations and communities as they work towards achieving greater food security in remote and northern regions.

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For More Information: Please visit www.diabetes.ca

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