



# Building Healthy Communities

## Food Access

**Where you live affects your health.** The way our communities are designed can influence our lives in many ways, from the quality of the air we breathe to how physically active we are.

**How you live affects the environment.** The choices you make every day can have an impact on the environment in a positive or negative way. We share our surroundings with each other and must work together to make changes for the better. Municipalities, health units and others are working to create healthier communities by planning for trails and sidewalks, parks and public spaces, safe roads, reductions in personal vehicle use, access to healthy local food, energy conservation and many other health supporting features. You can help too! Good health starts with each person, but it takes a community to support it.

**Access to Nutritious Food  
= A Healthier Community  
= A Healthier You**

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**Nutritious food is essential for good health.** Access to a safe, dependable and affordable supply of healthy food improves individual and community health and reduces the risk of many chronic diseases. Although Ontario has an abundance of nutritious food, not everyone has easy access to it. For some, living in a community or neighbourhood where grocery stores or farmers' markets are not within easy reach by walking, cycling or public transit makes it a challenge to access healthy food. Communities that are designed with food access in mind can result in food security for everyone. Food security is when all community members can conveniently access and afford safe, healthy, personally acceptable food. Food-secure communities value locally produced food and recognize the importance of preserving and protecting the land, water and other resources needed to produce it.

Think about the decisions your municipality makes and the actions you take that affect access to local nutritious food.

## Did you know?

- People are more likely to meet their nutritional needs when they have easy access to grocery stores that sell healthy, safe and affordable food rather than convenience stores that sell more expensive processed and packaged food.
- Community and roof top gardens can help communities be more self-sufficient in food. Gardening can improve healthy eating as well as physical activity, social interaction and mental health.
- Almost half of Ontario's towns and cities are built on prime agricultural land. In the last 30 years about two million hectares of land formerly used for growing food have been shifted to other uses.
- Canada imports about 40 per cent of its vegetables (excluding potatoes) and 80 per cent of its fruit to meet consumer demand. Transporting food from a distance has negative impacts on the environment.



## You can make a difference when you...

- Buy locally grown vegetables, fruit and other healthy foods and ask grocery stores, restaurants and other places where food is served to provide more local food.
- Participate in community, roof top or other shared gardening opportunities that help make communities more self-sufficient, beautify neighborhoods and build community spirit.
- Speak with your neighbours about issues affecting food security in your community and discuss ways to address them.
- Learn more about your municipality's official plan and how it can be used to promote access to healthy food.
  - The official plan guides how land should be used in your community, such as where housing, industry, shops, parks and schools will be located, what services are needed and how road and transportation systems are designed.
  - Official plans are updated at least every five years. A copy of the plan is made available to the public and your local council must ensure a public meeting is held about the plan.
- Contact your municipality at any time to discuss opportunities for input into your community's official plan. Any person can provide written comments and/or speak at the public meeting about the proposed plan.

## Municipalities show leadership when they...

- Make it easy for people to shop for healthy foods with zoning bylaws that allow for grocery stores, farmers' markets, produce stands and other vendors of healthy foods in all parts of a municipality.
- Identify community garden sites in spaces such as parks and land around schools and recreational facilities and provide garden groups with start up support and access to water.
- Set up a local Food Policy Council that brings municipal government, community organizations, farmers and concerned individuals together to improve local food access.
- Adopt land use policies that protect agricultural land suitable for growing food.

### For more information:

Refer to other fact sheets in this series: Air Quality, Active Transportation, Road Safety and Healthy Communities.