

Canadians and Healthy Eating: *how are we doing?*

NUTRITION HIGHLIGHTS, NATIONAL POPULATION HEALTH SURVEY, 1994-95

March 1997

About the NPHS and nutrition

The National Population Health Survey (NPHS) is a longitudinal survey on the health of Canadians. Conducted by Statistics Canada, the survey is designed to measure the health status of Canadians and to add to the existing body of knowledge about the determinants of health. The NPHS, which relies on respondents' self-reported health information, will survey the same group of respondents every two years for up to 20 years.

A number of Health Canada's supplementary questions to the 1994-95 NPHS related to nutrition. These questions focused on two key healthy eating messages-increasing starch and fibre consumption, and decreasing fat consumption-as well as on information about self-rated eating habits, self-reported height and weight, and sources of nutrition information.

Healthy eating is well recognized as an important way of actively promoting health. Healthy eating provides essential nutrients for proper growth and development, and can help reduce the risk of developing a variety of nutrition-related problems – including heart disease, cancer, obesity, hypertension (high blood pressure), osteoporosis, anaemia, dental decay and some bowel disorders.

Healthy eating also contributes to an overall sense of well-being and helps people to look, feel and perform better.

Nutrition Recommendations, Canada's Guidelines for Healthy Eating, and Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, introduced by Health Canada

in the early 1990s, form the basis of nationally recognized eating messages and a wide range of nutrition initiatives across the country.

The *Guidelines* adapted the scientific *Nutrition Recommendations* into consumer-friendly statements.

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, based on the *Guidelines*,

gave consumers more detailed information on establishing a healthy eating pattern through the daily selection of food.

How have Canadians responded to these healthy eating messages since they were first introduced? Are they aware of the key messages? Are they taking steps to act on them? If yes, what steps are they taking?

To help find the answers, Health

Canada included questions in a supplement to the 1994-95 National Population Health Survey (NPHS) conducted by Statistics Canada. A sample of 13 400 Canadians 12 years of age and over responded to Health Canada's questions. Survey data were adjusted (weighted) prior

to analysis to represent close to 24 million people from across Canada's 10 provinces. All NPHS data are based on *self-reported* responses.

What is healthy eating?

Five key messages...

- Enjoy a *variety* of foods.
- Emphasize cereals, breads, other grain products, vegetables and fruits.
- Choose lower-fat dairy products, leaner meats and foods prepared with little or no fat.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight by enjoying regular physical activity and healthy eating.
- Limit salt, alcohol and caffeine (*Canada's Guidelines for Healthy Eating*).

Reducing Dietary Fat

Consumers across the country appear to be aware of the “choose lower-fat” message. In fact, the results of the NPHS show that many people are concerned about the fat in the food they eat and are taking steps to change their eating habits.

Who’s concerned

Over two thirds (68%) of Canadians over the age of 12 years say they are concerned about the amount of fat in their food. Concern about fat varies according to a number of factors, including sex, age and income.

For example:

- People aged 45 to 64 are more likely than those in any other age group to be concerned about the amount of fat in the foods they eat, with 77% expressing concern. Interest among other adult age groups is also substantial, ranging from 63% among 20 to 24-year-olds to 73% among those 65 years and older. Almost one half (46%) of 12 to 19-year-olds report concern about the fat in their diet.
- Fewer women and men who are underweight (i.e., those with a BMI of less than 20 – see sidebar this page – based on self-reported height and weight) report concern about their fat intake (68% of women and 42% of men) compared to those in other BMI categories.

- People who are overweight (BMI>27) are the most concerned (83% of women, 69% of men) about dietary fat.

Concern equals action

Most people (86%) who express concern about the amount of fat in their diet are doing something to reduce their fat consumption. Of those concerned, more women (89%) than men (83%) report taking action to lower their dietary fat intake.

Regardless of income level or where they live, Canadians who are concerned about the amount of fat in their diet report changing the way they eat. In a similar vein, concerned Canadians of all weights are equally likely to report taking action to reduce the amount of fat they consume.

The proportion of concerned Canadians taking steps to reduce the fat in the foods they eat steadily increases as age increases. While 86% of concerned 20 to 24-year-olds report taking action to reduce the fat in foods they eat, more than nine out of ten (92%) Canadians aged 65 and older report taking some steps.

“Choose lower-fat dairy products, leaner meats and foods prepared with little or no fat.”

Canada’s Guidelines for Healthy Eating

Body Mass Index (BMI)

Body Mass Index = weight (kg)/height (m)². BMI categories used in this report are: underweight (BMI<20.0); acceptable weight (BMI 20.0 to 24.9); possibly overweight (BMI 25.0 to 27.0) and overweight (BMI>27.0). As BMI classification criteria do not apply to children, adolescents, seniors, and women who are pregnant or lactating – these groups were excluded from survey questions related to BMI.



What people are doing...

More than half of all concerned Canadians say they are taking six or more of the following steps to reduce the amount of fat in their food:

Most frequently mentioned...

• using less butter, oil, salad dressing	81%
• eating less fried or deep-fried foods	80%
• eating leaner meats, poultry, fish	79%
• using fewer high-fat milk products	71%
• using more low-fat milk products	67%
• eating fewer snacks such as chips and chocolate bars	64%
• choosing lower-fat content foods	61%
• baking, broiling or microwaving foods	60%

Less frequently mentioned...

• cutting down on nuts and seeds	34%
• using meat alternatives	28%



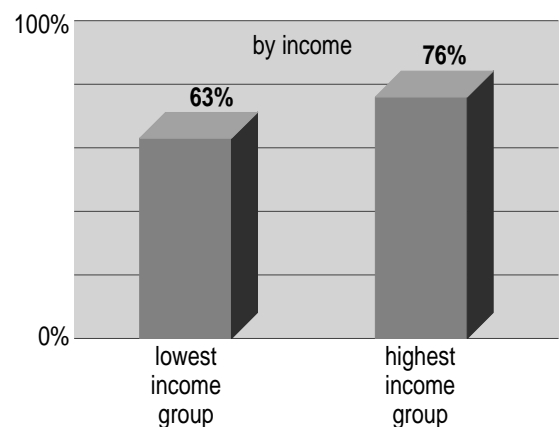
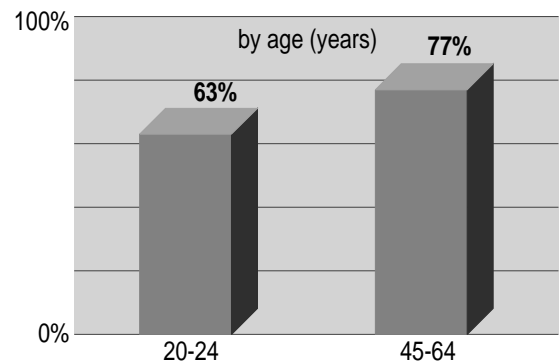
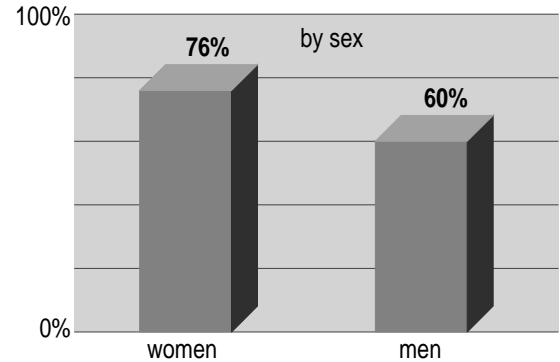
What people said...

Many Canadians believe that lower-fat foods:

• are readily available	79%
• are easy to prepare	65%
• taste good	57%

In addition, 64% say that food labels show the amount of fat content. Relatively few people (36%) believe that lower-fat foods are expensive.

Who's concerned about fat?



Increasing Starch and Fibre Intake

Emphasizing cereals, breads, other grain products, vegetables and fruits is a practical way for Canadians to increase the carbohydrates (starch) and fibre in the foods they eat. NPHS results suggest that the message to emphasize these foods is being heard and acted upon by many Canadians.

Who's concerned?

Almost half (44%) of Canadians say they are concerned about getting enough starch and fibre in their diet. More precisely:

- Over one half of Canadians aged 65 and older are concerned about getting enough starch and fibre in their diet (55%) – compared to only 36% of their counterparts in the 20 to 24-year-age group.
- The youngest age groups surveyed appear to be the least concerned about getting enough starch and fibre – with 25% of 12 to 19-year-olds saying they are concerned.

Taking action on starch and fibre

Three out of five Canadians (60%) who say they are concerned about the amount of starch and fibre in their diet are doing something about it. Of those concerned:

- 64% in the highest income category are taking action to increase the amount of starch and fibre in their diet, compared to 54% in the lowest income category.
- More women (64%) than men (54%) are taking steps to increase starch and fibre intake.
- Action to increase starch and fibre increases with age among adults (from 59% among 20 to 24-year-olds, to 65% for those aged 45 to 64), although action falls off slightly (57%) among seniors aged 65+.
- Adolescents are the least likely of all age groups to increase starch and fibre, with 40% of those concerned taking action.

“Emphasize cereals, breads, other grain products, vegetables and fruits.”

Canada's Guidelines
for Healthy Eating

Getting more starch and fibre

The most frequently reported steps to increase starch and fibre intake (among those concerned) are:

	women	men
• eating fruits and vegetables at most meals	86%	84%
• eating whole grain products	80%	78%
• eating meals with less meat	64%	54%
• choosing foods high in fibre	55%	53%
• baking with whole wheat flour and bran	45%	37%
• using meat alternatives	35%	31%

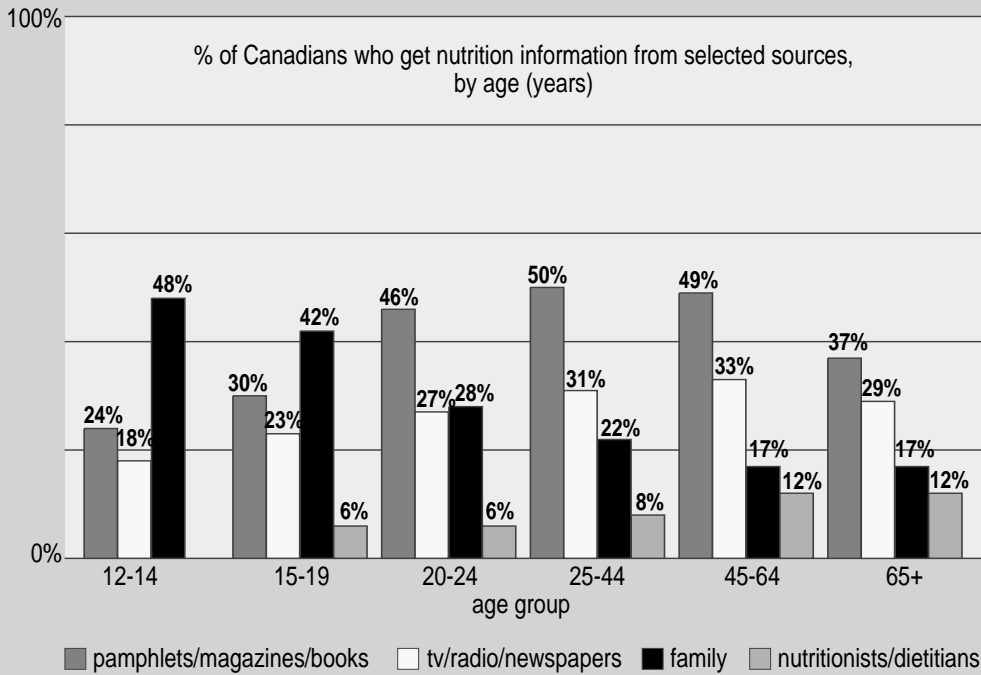


Where do people get nutrition information?

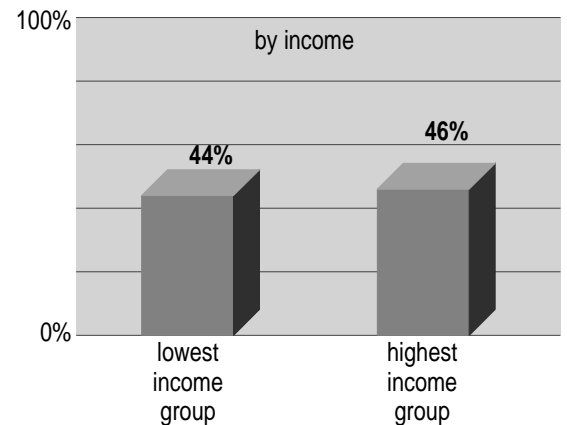
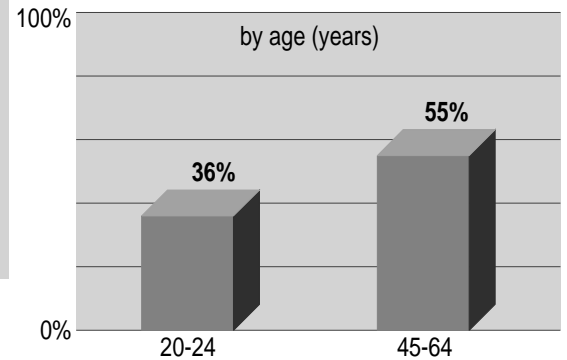
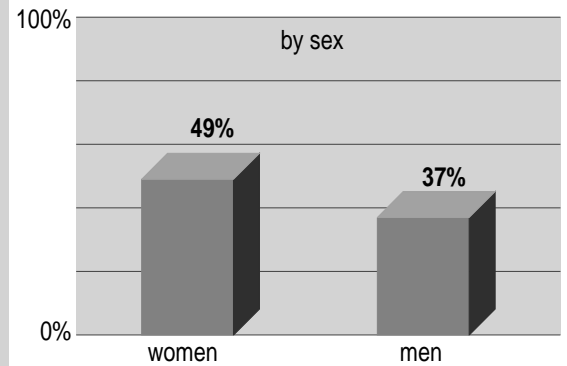
It appears from the results of the 1994-95 NPHS that many Canadians are hearing nutrition messages about

healthy eating. But where are they getting their information?

Nutrition Information – how do we get it?



Who's concerned about starch and fibre?



How Canadians Weigh In

Self-reported height and weight collected in the NPHS was used to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is widely accepted as a simple and fairly accurate way to assess body weight from the viewpoint of potential health risks. (See sidebar, page 2, for a description of BMI categories.)

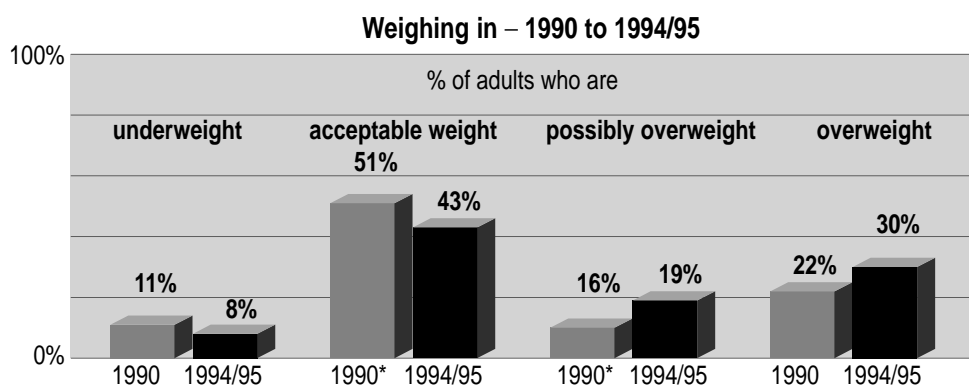
“overweight,” compared to 35% of those aged 55 to 64.

On a more positive note, a smaller proportion of Canadians, particularly women, are in the underweight category than was the case in 1990. The proportion of women categorized as “underweight” has dropped from 18% in 1990 to 12% in 1994/95.

Who’s trying to lose weight?

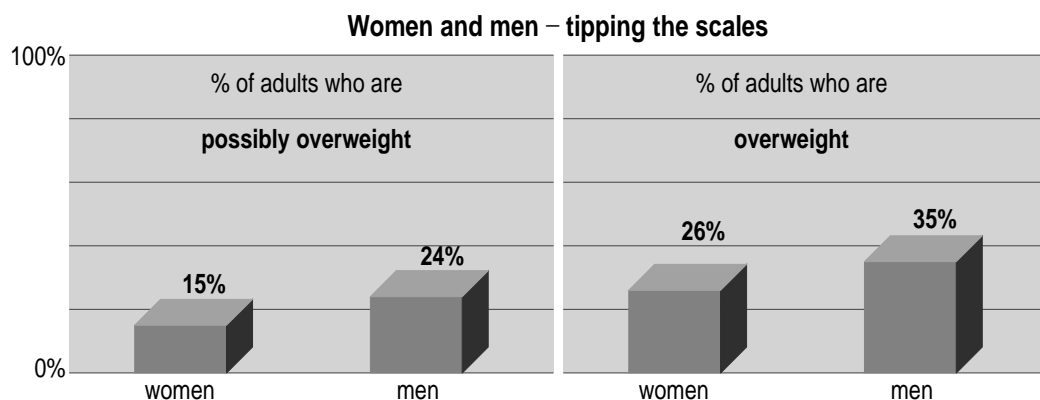
Two out of five women (40%) and nearly one quarter of men (23%) were trying to lose weight in 1994/95. Efforts to lose weight start young – among 12 to 14-year-olds, 27% of girls and 14% of boys report trying to lose weight. Who else is trying to lose weight?

- 70% of overweight women, and 48% of overweight men are trying to lose weight.
- Generally, more women than men in all weight categories, including 63% of possibly overweight women compared to 26% of possibly overweight men are trying to lose weight.
- Even people who are an acceptable weight are trying to lose – including 37% of women in this category, compared to only 8% of men who are an acceptable weight.



*1990 data are from Health Canada’s *Health Promotion Survey 1990: technical report*, which defines acceptable weight as 20.0-25.0 and possibly overweight as 25.1-27.0.

A full 30% of Canadians between the ages of 20 and 64 are overweight. Whereas 20% of men aged 20 to 24 are in the overweight category, this proportion increases to 43% for men aged 55 to 64. A similar trend is found among women – only 17% of women aged 20 to 24 are



How Canadians Rate Their Eating Habits

The 1994-95 NPHS asked Canadians of all ages to rate their eating habits. Almost half of Canadians (46%) say that their eating habits are “excellent” or “very good.” How people rate their eating habits seemed to be related to age and income. For instance:

- While 36% of young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 report having “excellent” or “very good” eating habits, the proportion rises to 58% of adults aged 65+.
- Fewer people in the highest income category (14%) rate their eating as “fair” or “poor” than those in the lowest income category (21%).

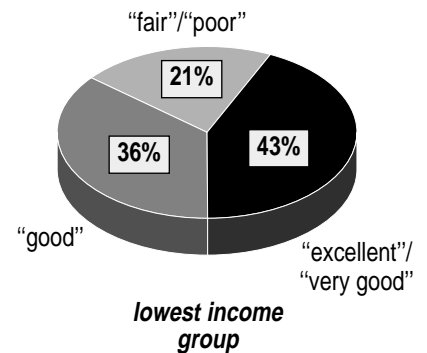
With respect to reducing dietary fat, and increasing starch and fibre consumption, survey results show that:

- 72% of Canadians who rate their eating habits as “excellent” or “very good” are concerned about the amount of fat in their food – of these, 90% are taking steps to reduce the amount of fat in the food they eat.

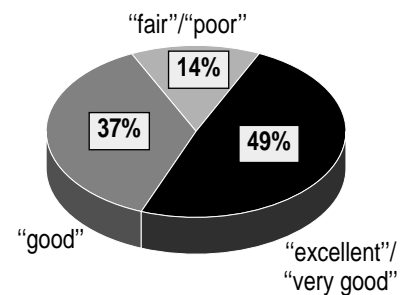
- 59% of those who rate their eating habits as “fair” or “poor” are concerned about dietary fat – with 77% taking action to reduce fat consumption.
- Close to one half (48%) of Canadians who rate their eating habits as “excellent” or “very good” express concern about the amount of starch and fibre in their diet – compared to just over a third (35%) of those who rate their eating as either “fair” or “poor.”
- As with fat, more people who rate their eating habits as “excellent” or “very good” are also taking steps to increase the amount of starch and fibre in the foods they eat (62%, compared to 56% of those who rate their eating habits as “fair” or “poor”).

Income and self-rated eating habits

“My eating habits are . . .



lowest income group



highest income group

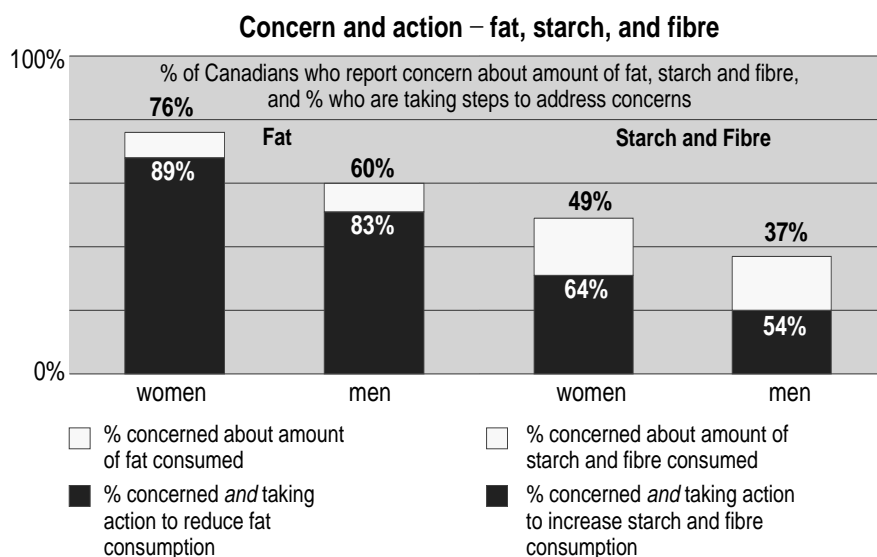


Wrapping It Up

In general, Canadians' eating habits are moving in the direction of current recommendations. Healthy eating messages are reaching many consumers who are taking a number of steps consistent with them.

These results seem to indicate that not only do people understand healthy eating messages, they also take solid action to change eating behaviours

(such as youth, women, income groups), and/or cross-analyzed in ways to broaden our understanding of consumers. Further analysis and synthesis of the NPHS data is encouraged. Data access has been facilitated by the recent Data Liberation Initiative (DLI) which makes the microdata file for the 1994-95 NPHS supplementary questions available free of charge to all universities and university-affiliated health promotion centres with a membership in the DLI. For more information, contact the university library or the Data Liberation Initiative, Statistics Canada, (613) 951-5904. Other sectors interested in accessing NPHS data can contact Statistics Canada by calling (613) 951-1653.



and habits. Clearly, there is a need to continue efforts to reach more Canadians. In particular, messages aimed at increasing starch and fibre intake as part of a healthy eating pattern need to be more broadly promoted. It is also important to provide meaningful direction to help more consumers, especially men, take steps to lower their fat intake. The continued prevalence of overweight also requires attention.

For more information ...

The analysis done to date is only a start. Because of the large sample size, the NPHS offers a rich source of data that could be explored in sub-samples of the population

Data sources

Health and Welfare Canada. *Nutrition Recommendations...A Call for Action* Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1991.

Health and Welfare Canada, Stephens T., Fowler Graham D., editors. *Canada's Health Promotion Survey 1990: technical report* Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1993.

Health Canada. *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1992.

Health Canada. *Report on the 1994-1995 National Population Health Survey: Nutrition Component*, Unpublished report prepared by for the Nutrition Programs Unit, 1996.

In addition, some data were from special runs of the NPHS nutrition data.

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