



Articles

Please, Sir... May I have more beef?

What we have long suspected is true—in Alberta, at least. Kids are filling up on pop, sugary snacks, junk food and other “empty” calories (the ones that fill your belly but not your body), to the point that many have an inadequate diet that is low in nutrients essential for physical and intellectual growth.

Shocking, isn't it? What with Canada being one of the world's most developed nations and member of the G8, and all.



We can thank [Sangita Sharma](#) for confirming our suspicions. Sharma is Centennial Professor and Endowed Chair of Indigenous Health in the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at the University of Alberta. She collects evidence to inform, develop, implement and evaluate nutrition programs to prevent chronic disease and improve dietary adequacy. In Edmonton, that means working with vulnerable populations such as Indigenous youth, new Canadians and others.

In this particular project, she and her team assessed the dietary intake of over 500 youth in schools and community organizations in Edmonton.

“We have very little real data on what Alberta's youth are eating,” she says. “Children are our future. They need good nutrition to grow and develop optimally. Are they getting that? This study was designed to find out.”

Sharma stresses that the results are still preliminary. The numbers need to be crunched some more. But they're not pretty.

“Youth aren't meeting basic dietary requirements,” she says. “48% didn't meet the recommended number of servings (in the [Canada Food Guide](#)) for Meat and Alternatives. About 23% of girls didn't get enough iron, 55% didn't get enough zinc, and 44% didn't get enough Vitamin B12. For boys, 12% didn't get enough iron, 36% not enough zinc and 26% not enough B12.”

The scary part is that these inadequacies cause fatigue, dizziness, weight loss, stunted growth, poor immunity, nerve damage, depression, trouble with concentration and memory, and more... all of which may add up to low school attainment. Did we mention already that children are our future?

Sharma promotes a varied diet with adequate servings of the various food groups as recommended by the Canada Food Guide. After all, no one food provides all the essential nutrients. However, because beef provides high levels of the nutrients found lacking in the diet of Alberta's youth, she promotes eating more beef and other red meats to address some of these inadequacies effectively and affordably.

“These youth need 2-3 servings of Meat and Alternatives a day,” she says, noting that intake depends on age and gender. “One serving equals 75 g of, say, eye of round beef roast, which costs 94c.”

To get the same amount of protein, you'd have to eat 207 g of tofu. To equal the iron, chew on 3 1/3 cups of spinach for \$2.80 (yes, Popeye was wrong on this). To match the zinc, try 3.75 cans of tuna costing \$9.30. And as for B12, only a big appetite and wallet could manage the 2.5 chicken breasts costing \$11.01.

So beef it is. Well, yes... and no. Beef is the red meat that's easily available in urban areas; however, Sharma quickly points out that Indigenous people could eat caribou, muskox, seal, Arctic char and other traditional foods with equal benefit, if not more.

"And we have a proposal in to the Agriculture Funding Consortium to work with organizations in sectors such as fruit, vegetables, pulses, eggs, dairy, poultry, and meat to promote nutrient-dense foods," she says. "Our objective is to improve overall dietary intake in Alberta's youth."

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