



Nutritious and Affordable Food Basket Update and Cost Report

OCTOBER 12, 2022

Presented by the Montréal Diet Dispensary

Highlights of the 2021-2022 Nutritious and Affordable Food Basket Update and Cost Report

For more than 70 years, the Montreal Diet Dispensary (Dispensary) has been monitoring the evolution of food costs in Montreal through its Nutritious Food Basket (NFB). This effective and credible tool estimates the minimum cost of a balanced grocery basket, covering the nutritional needs of the population in accordance to the nutrition recommendations.

In 2020-2021, the methodology used was revised to better represent the fluctuation of basic food prices and the impact of inflation on the annual cost of a food basket. This update resulted in the creation of the Nutritious and Affordable Food Basket (NAFB) and a brand-new web application.

HERE ARE 10 HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REPORT:

1. In October 2021, the minimum annual cost of a balanced diet of groceries to feed a standard familyⁱ was \$11,286.81, or \$7.73 per person per day. In July 2022, this cost increased to \$12,987.35, or \$8.90 per person per day. In less than a year, the price of the Nutritious and Affordable Food Basket has jumped by 15%. For a family that includes a pregnant woman, the cost increases to \$9.25 per person per day to account for the greater amount of food needed to meet the needs of the mother and her baby during pregnancy.
2. The basket is made up of 68 varied foods divided into 11 categories :
 - Vegetables
 - Starchy foods
 - Fruits
 - Animal-based proteins
 - Plant-based proteins
 - Dairy products and plant-based beverages
 - Grain products
 - Fats
 - Sugars
 - Commercial infant formula (CIF)
 - Baby cereal
3. The food categories and subcategories that increased most significantly over the periods evaluated were grain products and fresh, canned or frozen fruit, with increases of 37% and 41%, respectively.
4. The increase was also observed for basic foods and ingredients, such as pasta (116%), legumes (17%), white flour (225%), white sugar (25%) and margarine (51%). For example, in July 2022, white flour was about three times more expensive than in October 2021, and pasta was more than twice as expensive. Thus, we see that even the price of minimally processed culinary ingredients has increased.

5. During the summer season between April and July, while frozen fruit and vegetable prices continued to rise, fresh fruit and vegetable prices fell. In addition, although fresh vegetables generally cost more than frozen and canned vegetables, their prices appear to have remained more or less stable (3%), compared to the price of frozen vegetables, which increased by 18%. Frozen spinach (35%) and canned tomatoes (31%) appear to have contributed the most to this increase.
6. Plant-based protein sources also experienced an increase, with a 13% difference between October 2021 and January 2022. Among these, legumes increased more significantly (17%).
7. Legumes remain an economical plant-based protein source compared to animal protein sources, such as meat. The average price/kg of dairy products and plant-based beverages, similar to the price of plant-based protein sources, appears to have varied slightly between \$6.00/kg and \$6.50/kg over the periods.
8. Commercial infant formula (CIF) and baby cereal prices increased by 40% and 36%, respectively, between October 2021 and July 2022.
9. The annual cost of the NAFB for a standard family, \$12,987.35 per year, is significant from the perspective of affordable access to healthy food. To put this cost in perspective for a family of four on financial assistance (including approximately \$13,000 in social assistance payments, \$5,200 in family allowances and \$12,000 in Canada Child Benefit), the cost of the food basket represents approximately 40% of the family's income.
10. The level of moderate to severe food insecurity in Quebec increased by 10% to 15% between March 2020 and May 2022ⁱⁱ. Indeed, economic instability and inflationary trends disproportionately disadvantage low-income households, which are the most affected by food insecurity.

To view the 2021-2022 Nutritious and Affordable Food Basket Report, visit the Dispensary website :

[Dispensaire.ca](https://www.dispensaire.ca)



ⁱA standard family is composed of a man (31-50 years old), a woman (31-50 years old), a boy (14-18 years old) and a girl (9-13 years old). The amount of food to meet the family's nutritional needs considers the age, sex and physiological condition (pregnant, breastfeeding or none) of each member.

ⁱⁱFrançois Fournier (2022). La faim justifie des moyens. S'engager à réduire durablement et à prévenir l'insécurité alimentaire des ménages au Québec, Montréal, Observatoire québécois des inégalités. <https://www.observatoiredesinegalites.com/fr/detail-publication/la-faim-justifie-des-moyens>.

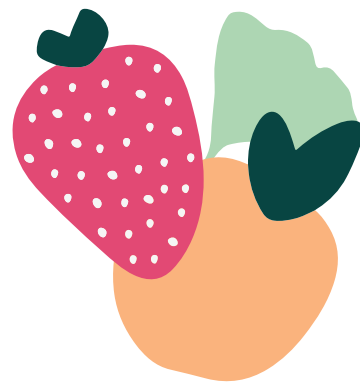


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Contextual Setting

For more than 70 years, the Montréal Diet Dispensary (Dispensary) has been monitoring the evolution of food costs in Montreal using a tool formerly known as the Nutritious Food Basket (NFB). The NFB was the first tool of its kind in Canada and, until the creation of the “National Food Basket” established by Health Canada in 1974, organizations across the country would call on the Dispensary to find out the cost of their NFB. To date, this unique tool estimates the minimum cost of a balanced grocery basket, covering the nutritional needs of the population in accordance to the nutrition recommendations. The NFB consisted of a list of foods in different quantities to meet the nutritional needs of individuals based on age, sex and physiological condition (e.g., pregnant or breastfeeding).

Over the years, the NFB was updated several times to reflect the changing eating habits of the population and to comply with the latest nutritional recommendations. Given the new healthy eating recommendations in the 2019 Canada’s Food Guide, the NFB needed to evolve.

In 2020, a multidisciplinary committee of experts was therefore created to define the methodology for updating the NFB. This allowed the Dispensary team to update the tool to better represent the nutritional needs of the population, the fluctuation of basic food prices and the impact of inflation on the annual cost of a food basket. In addition, the new tool was designed to be able to calculate the cost of feeding infants (0 to 6 months) with commercial infant formula (CIF), which was not the case before. In parallel, a web application has been developed to facilitate the use of the tool and deploy it more widely.

In 2021-2022, the new methodology and web application were piloted in Montreal with the launch of the Nutritious and Affordable Food Basket (NAFB). This synthesis report summarizes the methodology and presents the results of the first full cycle of price surveys (October 2021 to July 2022) in Montréal.

The NAFB Methodology : an updated and still relevant tool

REVISION OF THE FOOD LIST

Bibliographic research was conducted to identify initiatives developed around the world to measure the cost of food. A total of 37 initiatives or studies were reviewed. The main ones are the American “Thrifty Food Plan,” the European reference budget, the French reference budget and Health Canada’s National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB). The NNFB and the Dispensary’s NAFB have very similar goals. Both meet nutritional goals based on the dietary reference intakes (DRIs) and the 2019 Canada’s Food Guide. Nevertheless, the NAFB differs from the NNFB in two respects: its economic perspective and its price survey methodology.

CONSULTATION GROUPS

Working groups with the Dispensary’s nutritionists were organized to develop a new food list that corresponds to the goals of the NAFB. In addition to this expertise, focus groups were held in three regions of Quebec in order to maximize the representativeness of the different populations. The Montreal, Côte-Nord and Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine regions were selected according to various criteria, including the prevalence of food insecurity and population density.

Given the very different realities of the indigenous communities of Côte-Nord, Baie-James and Nunavik, a specific basket should be created to meet their needs. This is one of the Dispensary’s short-term projects.

FOOD QUANTITIES

Servings were adjusted for age (including infants), sex and physiological condition (e.g., pregnant or breastfeeding) to ensure that the nutritional needs are covered.

The total quantity of food in the NAFB is less than in the NFB because the energy requirements for an adult are based on the needs of a sedentary person – whereas the needs of a low-active adult were used in the former NFB.

In fact, according to Statistics Canada, nearly half of Canadian adults are not sufficiently active and almost a third of Quebec adults are sedentary^{1,2}.

THUS, FOR EACH CATEGORY, THE BASKET INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING NUMBER OF SERVINGS :

14 to 28 servings of dairy products and plant-based beverages per week

14 servings of other protein foods per week :

- 6 servings of legumes and other plant-based proteins
- 3 servings of fish
- 5 servings of meat

28 servings of vegetables per week








14 servings of fruit per week

42 servings of grain products per week

Composition of the Basket

The final food list for the new NAFB is presented in the table below.

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	
Vegetables 	FRESH VEGETABLES Carrot, fresh Onion, fresh Celery, fresh Kale, fresh Tomato, fresh Green pepper, fresh Lettuce, fresh (romaine, red leaf or curly) Cucumber, fresh Broccoli with stem, fresh Zucchini, fresh Turnip, fresh (rutabaga)	FROZEN OR CANNED VEGETABLES Spinach, frozen Tomatoes, canned (all types) Green peas, frozen Whole grain corn, canned Mixed vegetables, frozen
	Fruits 	FRESH FRUIT Apple, Fresh Banana, fresh Orange citrus fruit, fresh (oranges, clementines or mandarins) Melon, fresh (cantaloupe or honeydew)
Plant-based proteins 		LEGUMES Tofu, firm or extra firm, plain Canned legumes (all types) Dry legumes (all types) Lentils, dry
	Animal-based proteins 	FISH Light tuna, canned, in water Pink salmon, canned Sardines, canned White fish fillet, frozen (sole, haddock, halibut, tilapia or pollock)
		EGGS Eggs, chicken

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	
Dairy products and plant-based beverages 	Mozzarella cheese, brick Mild cheddar cheese, brick Milk, 3.25% M.F. Milk, 2% M.F. Milk, 1% M.F. Plain yogurt, 1 to 2% M.F. Fortified soy beverage (unsweetened or original)	
Grain products 	BASIC GRAIN PRODUCTS Brown rice Quick oatmeal, plain Whole grain wheat flour White flour Pasta (all types)	REFINED GRAIN PRODUCTS Flat bread, white (chapati, roti, pita or tortillas) Whole wheat bread, sliced O-shaped oat cereal, plain (e.g., Cheerios) Bran flakes (e.g., All-Bran Flakes)
	Starchy foods 	Potato, fresh (all varieties)
Fats 	Vegetable oil Mayonnaise Margarine Butter, unsalted	
Sugars 	White sugar Brown sugar Jam (all types) Honey	
Commercial infant formula 	Commercial infant formula powder, iron-fortified, step 1	
Baby cereal 	Baby cereal, plain (rice, barley or oats)	

Main Changes

BETWEEN 2005 & 2021

The NAFB contains proportionally more grain products and proteins of plant origin than the NFB. On the other hand, the quantities of dairy products and starchy foods in the basket decreased between 2005 and 2021.

New foods have also been added to the basket, such as yogurt, sunflower seeds, peanuts, soy beverage, canned sardines and brown rice. Conversely, processed foods, such as hot dogs, bologna, sliced processed cheese and some foods that are less representative of the population's eating habits, such as liver and baked beans, were removed.

Finally, although the quantity of fruit and vegetables remains the same, there is a greater diversity of fruit and vegetables in the current basket (24 different fruit and vegetables compared to 20). These changes are consistent with Canada's Food Guide recommendations, which encourages the consumption of plant-based proteins sources and high-fibre foods, while limiting processed foods.

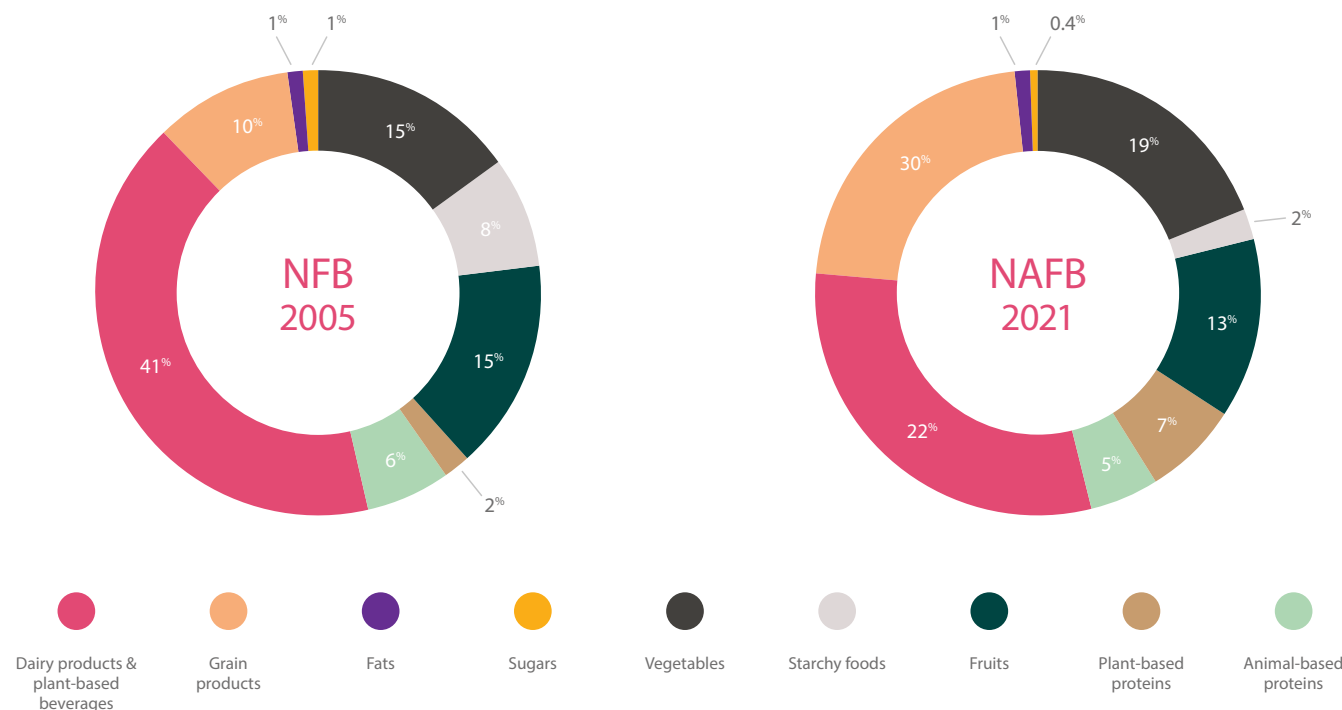
REVISION OF THE PRICE SURVEY PROCESS

The committee of experts highlighted several methodological considerations to guide the price survey process. The key considerations are :

- The frequency of surveys must make it possible to monitor the impact of the seasons on the price of the basket;
- The choice of grocery stores where the surveys will be conducted must be based on the purchasing habits of community members;
- The characteristics of the grocery stores in the area (size, target market and diversity of banners), including accessibility, must be taken into account in the selection.

Thus, the following elements summarize the new approach to price surveys :

- It was determined to conduct the surveys on a quarterly basis, between the second and third weeks of January, April, July and October of each year, within a short time frame, ideally 24 to 48 hours.
- Since the Dispensary does not have the capacity to survey the entire territory of Montreal, the decision was made to conduct the price surveys in the borough determined to have a median level of wealth.
- To determine this median borough, the 19 boroughs of Montréal were classified according to four criteria :
 - The average after-tax income;
 - The frequency of low after-tax income;
 - The percentage of homeowners;
 - The cost of the average rent.
- According to this ranking, Lachine was determined to be the median borough. Therefore, this is where the price surveys have been conducted since October 2021.
- The characteristics and accessibility of the grocery stores present in the territory were taken into account. Based on the results of the focus groups, it was decided to continue to conduct price surveys in the major banners, but also to include low-cost grocery stores, such as Maxi and Super C.



Latest Data for Montréal

OCTOBER 2021 TO JULY 2022

The data presented in this report is based on the price surveys conducted in selected grocery stores in Lachine over four quarterly periods (October 2021, January 2022, April 2022 and July 2022)ⁱ.

The results were obtained using the web application and taking into account the price of food as well as the amount of food needed to meet the nutritional needs of a standard familyⁱⁱⁱ. In addition, a budget of 5% of the price of the NAFB is allocated to miscellaneous foods/ingredients (coffee, tea, herbs, spices and condiments, etc.) based on the same model as Health Canada's NFB.

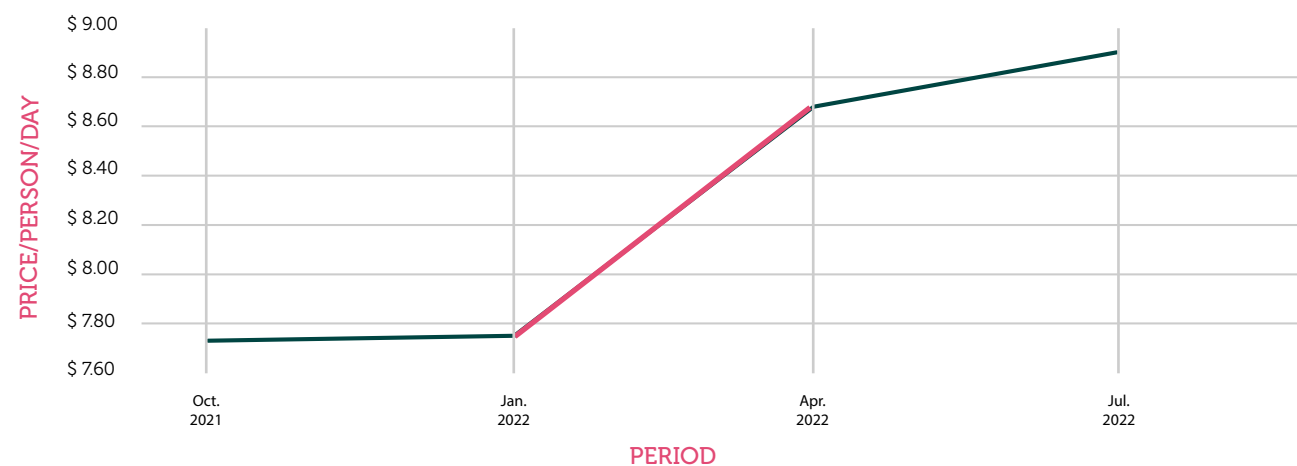
Evolution of the NAFB Price

In October 2021, the minimum cost of a balanced grocery basket, covering the nutritional needs of the population in accordance to the nutrition recommendations to feed a typical family was \$11,286.81, or \$7.73 per person per day. In July 2022, this cost increased to \$12,987.35, or **\$8.90 per person per day**. This represents a 15% increase in cost per year for the family. For a family that includes a pregnant woman, the cost increases to \$9.25 per person

per day to account for the greater amount of food needed to meet the needs of the mother and her baby during pregnancy.

As shown in the figure below, the price of the NAFB increased significantly between January 2022 and April 2022 and continued to do so through July 2022.

EVOLUTION OF THE NAFB PRICE



ⁱ The October 2021 and January 2022 price surveys were conducted at two grocery stores. Following a committee meeting in April 2022, a third was added to lessen the impact of outliers.

ⁱⁱⁱ A standard family consists of a man (31-50 years old), a woman (31-50 years old), a boy (14-18 years old) and a girl (9-13 years old). The amount of food to meet the nutritional needs of the family takes into account the age, gender and physiological condition (pregnant, nursing or none) of each member.

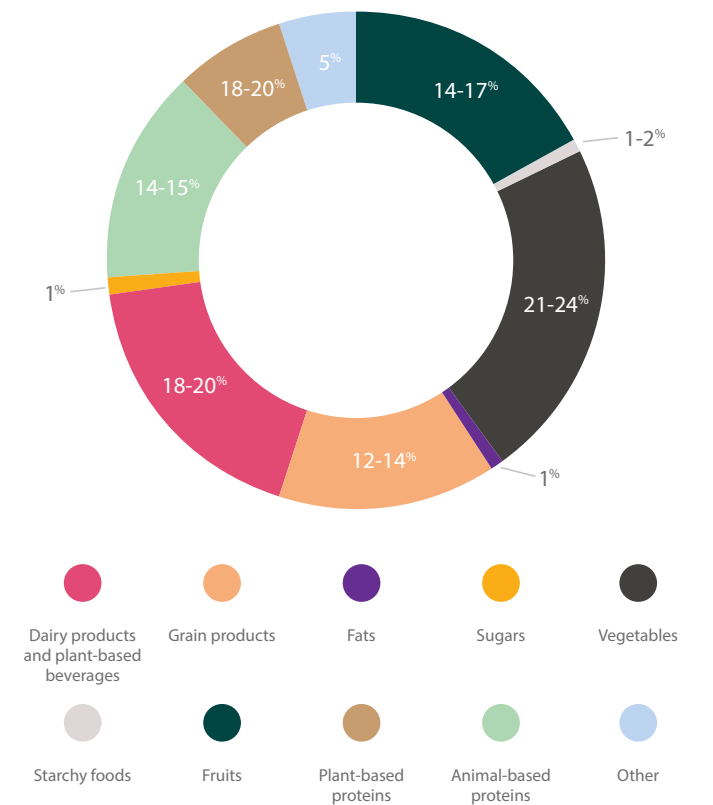
EVOLUTION OF THE AVERAGE PRICE BY FOOD CATEGORY

The basket price distribution is shown in the adjacent figure. We see that vegetables (21-24%), fruit (14-17%), dairy products and plant-based beverages (18-20%) and animal protein sources (14-15%) occupy the largest shares.

In the analysis, it was possible to observe that the cost of seven of the ten categories increased by 10% or more^{iv}. The vast majority of categories increase more markedly between January 2022 and April 2022.

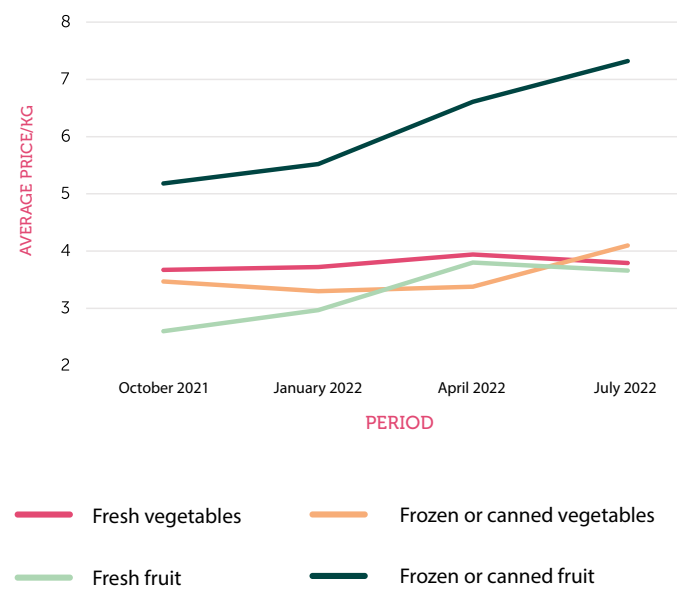
The categories and subcategories that increased most significantly over the periods evaluated were grain products and fruit, with increases of 37% and 41%, respectively. In the case of grain products, staples such as white flour and pasta were most affected by the increase in food prices between October 2021 and July 2022, with a significant increase of 46%. Particularly, in July 2022, white flour was about three times more expensive than in October 2021, and pasta was more than twice as expensive. Thus, we see that even the price of minimally processed culinary ingredients has increased.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE BASKET PRICE BETWEEN OCTOBER 2021 AND JULY 2022



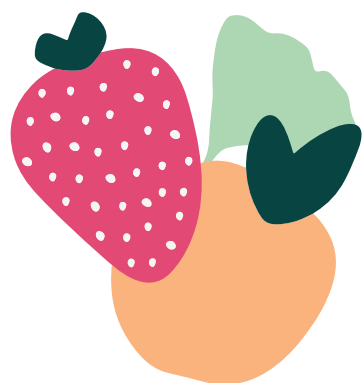
^{iv} 10% is the threshold the Dispensary uses to judge an increase as noteworthy.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AVERAGE PRICE OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

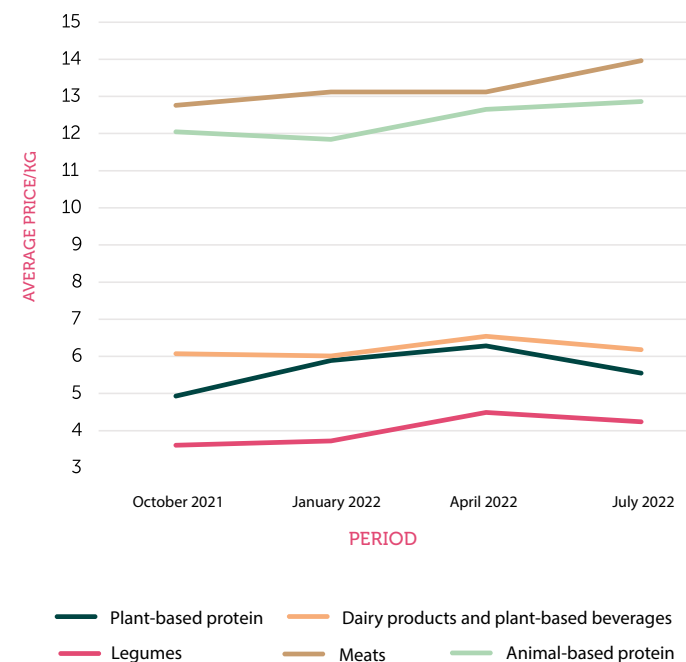


As for fruit, both subcategories (fresh, and frozen or canned), shown in the graph above, appear to have increased in a similar way, although the average price/kg of frozen or canned fruit is higher.

It is also possible to observe that, during the summer season between April and July, while the prices of frozen fruit and vegetables continued to increase, the prices of fresh fruit and vegetables decreased. In addition, although fresh vegetables generally cost more than frozen and canned vegetables, their prices appear to have remained more or less stable (3%), compared to the price of frozen vegetables, which increased by 18%. Frozen spinach (35%) and canned tomatoes (31%) appear to have contributed the most to this increase.

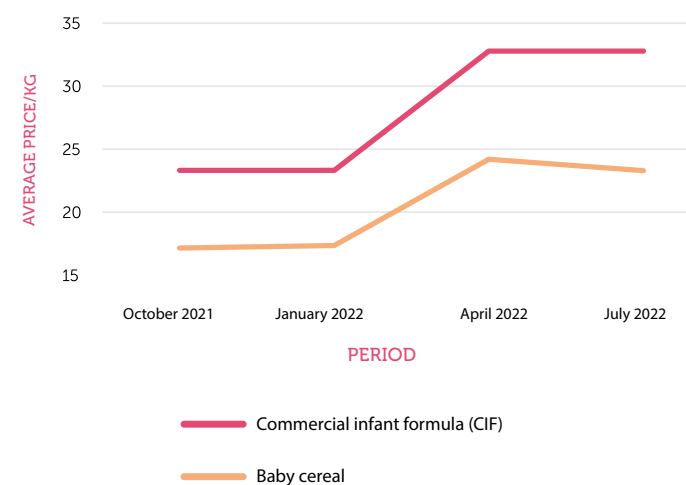


AVERAGE PRICE EVOLUTION OF PROTEIN SOURCES



Plant-based protein sources also experienced an increase, with a 13% difference between October 2021 and January 2022. Among these, legumes increased more significantly (17%). Nevertheless, as shown in the adjacent figure, legumes remain an economical plant-based protein source compared to animal protein sources, such as meat. The average price/kg of dairy products and plant-based beverages, approximating the price of plant-based protein sources, appears to have varied slightly between \$6.00/kg and \$6.50/kg over the periods. As a result, dairy products and soy beverages, as well as other protein sources, such as legumes and nuts, continue to be nutritious and economical choices for families in an inflationary environment.

EVOLUTION OF THE PRICE OF BABY FOODS



In addition, it can be noted that commercial infant formula (CIF) and baby cereal prices increased by 40% and 36%, respectively, between October 2021 and July 2022. As shown in the figure, this price difference is almost entirely related to the significant increase between January 2022 and April 2022. In July 2022, CIF cost \$32.77/kg on average and baby cereal \$23.30/kg. For example, consider a baby aged 3 months who drinks eight 120 ml bottles per day (about 139 g of CIF/day); this translates into a cost of about \$4.56/day to feed them^{3,4}. Furthermore, for a mother aged 31-50 breastfeeding her baby, the additional cost to meet her needs can be estimated at \$1.01/day as of July 2022. Thus, this data shows that breastfeeding can generate savings of up to 78% (\$3.55/day).

Finally, although they represent only 1% of the basket price distribution, we observe a high increase in the price of fats (24%) and sugars (19%). Specifically, a 51% increase was noted for margarine and 25% for white sugar, which are staple cooking ingredients. This data follows the trend observed with flour prices, where the prices of culinary ingredients and minimally processed foods are experiencing remarkable increases.

How to Interpret This Data?

The latest data from the October 2021 to July 2022 NAFB cost calculation suggests an increase in the annual cost of \$1,698.25, or 15%, which is higher than the projections made in this regard⁵. This difference can be illustrated by the notable increase (over 10%) in the price of most food categories, with a greater increase for grain products (37%) and fruit (41%). The increase is also observed for basic foods, such as pasta (116%), legumes (17%), white flour (225%), white sugar (25%) and margarine (51%). **This trend is worrisome because it applies to the cost of basic foods that have never before seen an increase of this magnitude.** This makes it increasingly difficult for low-income families to eat healthily at low cost. It is also important to remember that the NAFB assumes that the population eats exclusively at home and does not include the cost of food services (restaurants, delivery services, cafeterias or school caterers, etc.).

The NAFB price results also showed an increase of almost 40% in the price of baby foods. In addition, for the first time in more than 70 years, we compared estimates of the cost of commercial infant formula to the cost of breastfeeding using the NAFB tool. As of July 2022, the results support the notion that breastfeeding is advantageous from a budgetary perspective, providing real savings with a cost per day approximately four times lower than commercial infant formula.

The annual cost of the NAFB for a standard family, \$12,987.35 per year, is significant from the perspective of affordable access to healthy food. To put this cost in perspective for a family of four on financial assistance (including approximately \$13,000 in social assistance payments, \$5,200 in family allowances and \$12,000 in Canada Child Benefit), the cost of the food basket represents approximately 40% of the family's income⁶. In other words, a family receiving approximately \$34,000 in financial assistance will pay almost half that amount in grocery bills.

Moreover, these figures provide a good reflection of the current inflationary environment. Indeed, in May 2022, Statistics Canada reported an inflation rate of 7.7% – the highest since 1983⁷. This can be explained by the high cost of gas and housing as well as the increase in the price of groceries. The data for July 2022 shows that inflation in Quebec is slightly below the Canadian average (7.3% vs. 7.6%). However, the price of food in stores increased by 8.8% between July 2021 and July 2022⁸.

Several events in the past year have had an impact on the Canadian food system and may have contributed to the significant price increase of several food categories in the NAFB.

Examples include the Russian invasion of Ukraine, numerous adverse weather and climate events in agricultural regions, and labour shortages in the Canadian agri-food industry⁹. In this sense, the food system is in crisis now, more than ever. This highlights inequities on multiple levels and the impacts on household food security.

According to a recent publication, the level of moderate to severe food insecurity in Québec increased by 10% to 15% between March 2020 and May 2022. Indeed, economic instability and inflationary trends disproportionately disadvantage low-income households, which include single mothers, Black households and Indigenous households, who are most affected by food insecurity¹⁰.

LIMITS

While the NAFB methodology has been refined to improve the reliability of the data, it should be noted that the data in this report consists of estimates. A few limiting factors during data collection may have slightly impacted the results obtained, including uncertainties related to the product formats to be used, price changes and confusion related to in-store specials. In addition, the change in the collection methodology during the pilot phase should also be considered.

THE ADDED VALUE OF SUCH A TOOL FOR THE TERRITORY

The worrying reality of food insecurity, both in Montréal and in Québec as a whole, is exacerbated by the inflationary environment and therefore confirms the importance of having a tool like the NAFB. Based on the science and needs of the population, the NAFB is a tool for defining the minimum cost of healthy eating. Its revision in 2020 has allowed the Dispensary to update its price survey and analysis methodology, adapt the basket to the new Canada's Food Guide recommendation and deploy the tool more widely, beyond Montréal. The NAFB is currently being piloted in three regions of Québec. This provincial project benefits from the expertise of a steering committee, composed of representatives from the public health sector, as well as the academic and community sectors. This work will enable valuable comparative analyses with Montréal. Moreover, the higher rate of food insecurity among certain subgroups of the population reinforces the relevance of developing specific baskets that would allow a better estimate of the cost of a balanced diet of groceries accounting for their realities.

The NAFB is a valuable monitoring tool that can be used to advocate for affordable access to healthy food in Montréal and in all regions of Québec. The NAFB is also valued by professionals that work in food security, who provide support to families in economically vulnerable situations with regard to food budgeting. Through its commitment to people in precarious situations, the Dispensary intends to collaborate to the full extent of its abilities with the different stakeholders in the community, in order to achieve these objectives.

Furthermore, the recent results of the NAFB trial in October 2021 have shown that there are disparities in the cost per person per day between boroughs in the City of Montréal. It would therefore be pertinent for the NAFB to be operationalized at a more local level in partnership with neighbourhood organizations working in food security.

The results presented in this report, highlighting significant variation in food costs over time, show that more and more low-income households are at risk of becoming food insecure. This problem entails a number of significant consequences with regard to physical and psychosocial health. During pregnancy, it increases the risk that a baby will be born at a low birth weight¹¹. For infants and children, it is their physiological and psychological development that is at stake¹².

Rising food prices are only one piece of the food insecurity puzzle. The disparity in food prices that remains within the Montréal territory, the lack of financial resources of households and lack of affordable housing, and the issues relating to physical accessibility to nutritious food are all elements that must be considered to address the situation. Everyone has their own mandate and expertise, which is the reason why a collective approach among the various concerned bodies is necessary to combat food insecurity and poverty.



Acknowledgments

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