

High cost, poor food selection place northern women at nutritional risk

One-quarter of women of child-bearing age in the Northwest Territories are “at risk” nutritionally, a Health Canada official says.

Kathy Hunter, a consultant for children’s programs in the Northwest Territories, says poor food selection and high costs are the main culprits. Health Canada studies indicate that the nutritional intake of these women is inadequate, particularly for key nutrients such as iron, calcium, folic acid and vitamins A, C and D.

“Food is shipped by weight, and junk food is lighter than more nutritious food, such as butter or flour or potatoes,” says Hunter. Lighter means cheaper, and this is an important factor in places like Paulatuk, NWT, where food prices are 470% higher than in Ottawa, and in Holman, where 2 litres of milk cost \$6.55, compared with \$3.29 in Ottawa.

To help combat nutritional prob-

lems, federal Health Minister Allan Rock recently announced \$230 000 in funding to develop prenatal nutrition projects in the NWT. The goals are to improve the health of pregnant women, encourage breast-feeding, increase the number of babies born at ideal birth weights and to improve women’s knowledge about nutrition. Two dietitians will run the program.

“For some women, the lack of skills needed to prepare nutritious foods is a contributing factor,” says Hunter. “Most communities are small and isolated. There is a need for people who understand good nutrition practices and [can provide] breast-feeding support.”

Elders are also being invited to provide these women with information on traditional “country foods” such as dried meats and fish stews.

However, there is concern about the level of contaminants in traditional

foods and breast milk. Toxins such as persistent organic pollutants travel to the north in ocean and wind currents and enter the food chain. Studies of maternal blood have found that women in Northern Canada have much higher levels of contaminants than women in the south.

Despite these fears, the nutritional benefits still outweigh the risks, says Sheila Watt-Cloutier, president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference of Canada. “We still don’t know the long-term effects of exposure to persistent organic pollutants, but we do know the effects of [switching from] traditional foods: diabetes, tooth decay and heart disease.”

The Centre for Indigenous Peoples’ Nutrition and Environment at McGill University also recommends breast-feeding and the consumption of traditional foods for people living in the North. — *Janis Hass, Ottawa*

Obesity may soon be leading cause of preventable death in US

Fast food and larger portions of it are taking a toll in the US, where the surgeon general says 60% of adults are overweight or obese, as are nearly 13% of children.

“Being overweight [or] obese may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking,” says Surgeon General David Satcher. Some

300 000 deaths are already associated with obesity and excess weight in the US every year. Tobacco use is associated with about 400 000 deaths annually.

The prevalence of excess weight and obesity has nearly doubled among children and adolescents since 1980, and is increasing in both sexes and among all adults. The trends are already associated with major increases in the prevalence of conditions such as asthma and type 2 diabetes mellitus in children. Satcher said failure to address the issue “could wipe out some of the gains we’ve made in areas such as heart disease, several forms of cancer, and other chronic health problems.” The direct and indirect costs attributed to excess weight and being overweight or obese were estimated to be \$117 billion in 2000.

The US isn’t alone. In Canada, physical inactivity is estimated to have cost about \$2.1 billion — 2.5% of total direct health care spending — in 1999 (*CMAJ* 2001;163[11]:1435-40). Research has also shown that Canadian children are getting heavier (*CMAJ* 2001;163[11]:1429-33).

Between 1981 and 1996, the prevalence of excess weight increased from 15% to 28.8% in boys and from 15% to 23.6% among girls. During the same period, the prevalence of obesity more than doubled in both sexes, from 5% to 13.5% for boys and to 11.8% for girls.

The US report, *The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, suggests various approaches to combat the problem. These include mandatory physical education classes for students, supplying healthier foods at schools and safe and accessible recreational facilities for people of all ages. The report also says Americans should spend less time in front of the TV and that more emphasis should be placed on educating health professionals about the prevention and treatment of excess weight and obesity. Satcher also wants the food industry to promote healthier food choices, including smaller portions.

He says a change in perception of obesity is also needed so that “health becomes the chief concern, not personal appearance.” — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Canadians’ penchant for donuts and other high-fat foods is creating concern about obesity here too