

COVID-19 underscores need to address 'invisible pandemic' of diet-related chronic diseases

September 29 2021, by Gillian Rutherford



Kim Raine, primary investigator on Alberta's Nutrition Report Card, says the newly released 2021 report card shows that the pandemic has made it harder for children to eat well, but also suggests that nutrition-focused public health policies can make a positive difference. Credit: School of Public Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light both weaknesses and

opportunities in the way public policies can support children's long-term health, according to the seventh and final [Alberta Nutrition Report Card on Food Environments for Children and Youth](#), released today.

"Kids eat what's available to them, what's affordable and readily accessible," said principal investigator Kim Raine, distinguished professor in the University of Alberta's School of Public Health.

"It's time for us to pay attention to the data about the invisible pandemic of diet-related chronic diseases, including heart disease, diabetes and some cancers," Raine said. "Poor diet ranks second only to tobacco as a risk for premature death in Canada."

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it harder for children to eat well, partly because school lunch programs and daycare meals were interrupted, Raine said, and children who eat poorly are at higher risk for severe disease if they contract the virus.

"The limits that were placed on people during COVID-19 brought the grade down to a D in 2021—the general trend is mediocre and worsening," Raine said of the report's findings.

At the same time, the pandemic highlighted the potential to make a difference with nutrition-focused [public health policies](#). "We learned during COVID that heroic measures can be taken to protect the health of the population," Raine said.

"We need to stop taking chronic diseases for granted and pay attention to how we can protect ourselves and our kids, just like we pay attention to the cases of COVID-19 during the visible pandemic."

Healthy eating: More than an individual choice

The nutrition report card assesses 40 evidence-based benchmarks to gauge the strength of policies and actions that affect how [food](#) is promoted, priced and sold to families in Alberta—such as the concentration of fast-food restaurants, how much new teachers learn about nutrition and whether breastfeeding is encouraged in public settings. All contribute to the food "environments" where children are raised and establish lifelong eating habits.

"I think there is an assumption that it's up to kids and parents to make the right choices," she said. "But if you take your kids to play hockey and the only snack that's available is chips and pop, there's no healthy choice."

Public policies ranging from health promotion campaigns to food labeling requirements can help support better individual choices, Raine said, because there are no vaccines against premature chronic diseases.

"Prevention requires improving food environments and ensuring there's an opportunity for kids to make healthy choices," she said. "It's something that we're all responsible for—parents are trying to do their best within the constraints of these environments."

Communities at the table

For the first time, the 2021 nutrition report card included data gathered by individual communities across Alberta, including Lethbridge, which reviewed the beverages, food and signage in its public recreation centers.

Representatives of town and city councils, schools, child care centers, civic organizations and health professionals came together to measure local food environment factors, and then the U of A team provided analyses and co-created community-specific recommendations, such as changing vending machine menu options or adding signage to encourage

healthy choices.

As a legacy of the project, online learning modules and an app are now in development that would allow communities to continue making improvements on their own.

"The idea is to take out the middle people, so [community members](#) can be the citizen scientists to assess and think about their own environments and strategies," Raine said.

Provided by University of Alberta

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