



Food skills are defined as a set of skills needed to provide and prepare safe, healthy and culturally familiar meals.

These skills include how to buy and or grow food, read labels, plan meals, prepare and cook food safely, store food and make recipe substitutions.

Focus on Food in Simcoe Muskoka

Food Skills

What would food skills look like in our community?

- Local government, community organizations and business have policies and guidelines that support community gardens in parks, schools and business sites to help people learn to grow food.
- Community gardens and other “grow your own” projects are supported with funds and resources such as land, water supply, tax relief, insurance and gardening tools.
- Food skills training is offered at community initiatives such as the Good /Fresh Food Box programs, fruit and harvest sharing programs, fresh food markets and bulk food buying clubs.
- Community kitchens, community food centres and bake ovens are available in neighbourhoods for residents wanting to improve food skills.
- Elementary and secondary schools have a compulsory food skills component in the curriculum that prepares children and youth to be competent in food preparation.
- Parents and caregivers role model basic “from scratch” cooking and food skills in the home to transfer these important skills to children.

Definitions

A collective or community kitchen is a small group of people in a community-based cooking program that pools resources and labour to produce large quantities of prepared food that is divided among participants to take home for their own use. Cooking in a group enables participants to share food/nutrition knowledge and skills, stretch food dollars and build social support.

A community food centre includes services such as emergency food, gardens, kitchens, food education and training programs that usually engage many community members (e.g. The Stop in Toronto).

A community bake oven is an oven that is accessible to the community for people to share. It can be used for anything from baking bread to cooking casseroles to drying herbs.

There are many benefits when everyone in the community has good food skills.

- Frequency of family meals and involvement of children and youth in food preparation is linked to eating healthier.
- Children, youth and adults are more likely to eat nutrient-rich foods including vegetables and fruit when they are involved in meal preparation.
- Knowing how to prepare and grow food can be a significant source of personal pride and self-esteem.
- Youth have the opportunity to learn an important life skill and connect socially with peers.
- The development of good food skills can help decrease grocery bills by reducing dependence on more costly, ready-to-eat foods.
- Increased demand for local foods can benefit the local farming economy.
- Community food skills programs promote hands-on learning, positive social experiences and the development of mutual support networks.

Food skills are important for everyone

- Many people across all income and education levels have lost touch with the skills necessary to choose, grow and prepare healthy food “from scratch” and could benefit from food skills opportunities.
- The development of good food skills is particularly beneficial for individuals whose limited incomes make it a challenge to buy enough healthy food to meet their needs or who rely on ready-to-eat, more expensive and processed foods.
- A diet that relies highly on processed foods can have significant health consequences, including an increased risk of diet-related chronic diseases and health conditions such as overweight and obesity.
- Food and cooking skills initiatives should not only include what is needed to make healthy food choices, but should also include other aspects of food skills such as understanding where food comes from, how it is produced and knowing where to find food in the community (i.e. grocery stores, farmers markets and emergency food sources).

Food skills alone is not enough

The inability of households to obtain and afford safe, healthy and familiar foods is primarily linked to low household income, not problems arising from poor food skills or budgeting skills, or a lack of motivation to prepare foods from scratch. Community-based food skills programs do not compensate for the lack of income that families need for a safe and healthy diet. Provincial and other policy change is needed to ensure that low-income households have enough money to buy food.

For examples of food skills initiatives, check out the following links:

- The Stop Community Food Centre (Toronto, Ontario) www.thestop.org
- Peer Nutrition Program (Toronto, Ontario) www.toronto.ca/health/peernutrition/abouttheprogram.htm
- Food Skills for Families (British Columbia, Ontario) www.foodskillsforfamilies.ca

Other factsheets available in this series:



Food Security is when people can easily obtain and afford safe, healthy and familiar food. Communities that are “food secure” value local food and work to preserve and protect the land, water and other resources needed to produce food.



A Sustainable Local Food System allows people to eat a healthy diet and provides fair payment to local farmers and those who process and sell food. It provides a safe and quality food supply now and into the future.



Urban Agriculture is growing food in or around cities, towns or smaller communities. Some examples include backyard gardens, beehives, berry patches, shared gardens, container gardening, edible landscaping, greenhouse agriculture, herb gardens, urban farms, orchards and vineyards, rooftop gardens and schoolyard gardens.



Local Food Procurement Policy gives direction to institutions such as government, colleges, school boards/schools, and hospitals on the type of local food to buy and where to get it. It helps local farmers and those who process and sell food compete fairly.

For more information or to access the other factsheets available in this series contact *Your Health Connection*.