



Thrive!

A plan for a healthier Nova Scotia

A policy and environmental approach
to healthy eating and physical activity

Executive Summary

The rise in childhood obesity and preventable chronic disease is a global issue. In Nova Scotia, one in three children and youth is overweight or obese, and rates of unhealthy eating, sedentary behaviour, and inactivity are much higher. Our rates of chronic disease are among the highest in the country.

The causes are complex and deeply rooted in society. They range from socioeconomic factors—such as how much money we make, our level of education and where we live—to our busy, rushed lifestyles, and modern conveniences.

Most of us have heard that we need to “eat less and move more” to be healthy. Yet over the last few decades, our social and physical environments have changed in ways that promote the opposite behaviour. The choices we make as individuals are shaped by the choices we have and today, less healthy options outweigh the healthy ones. But we can shift that balance.

In 2010, government committed to develop a childhood obesity prevention strategy. *Thrive! A plan for a healthier Nova Scotia* focuses on healthy eating and physical activity. The plan shifts the emphasis from weight to health and outlines priority actions to create environments that make it easier for Nova Scotians to eat well and be active. These two factors, in addition to helping prevent childhood obesity, are among the most important ways to help all Nova Scotians be happier and healthier today and to reduce the impacts of chronic disease in the future.

There are no simple solutions to prevent childhood obesity and chronic disease. It will take all of us—individuals, organizations, governments, and all sectors of society—working together over the long term to create the cultural shift that is needed to improve our collective health. *Thrive!* lays the foundation to do that. The directions and actions in this plan are based on scientific evidence and expert and public input. They provide a framework for future action that builds on existing success, while setting out realistic and achievable next steps.

Direction #1: Support a Healthy Start for Children and Families

The road to health begins long before we are born. Early experiences influence how our brain develops, our ability to learn, and our long-term health. These experiences include the health and wellbeing of our parents, conditions during pregnancy, and the ways we live, eat, move and play as infants and young children. *Thrive!* focuses on greater use of best practice and guidelines for prevention in public health and primary care, such as consistent growth monitoring, information and resources for parents, and more support for breastfeeding.

Direction #2: Equip People with Skills and Knowledge for Lifelong Health

As we work to change our environment and surroundings, we will also support individuals to be more “health literate.” This means equipping people, starting as young as possible, with the skills and knowledge to make the healthiest possible choices in their circumstances. The ability to move with confidence (physical literacy) and an understanding of food and nutrition, and basic food skills (food literacy) are needed to adopt healthier behaviours for life. The plan includes actions to encourage free play and activity in child-care, increase physical education and activity in schools, and teach food skills and knowledge in schools through community programming.

Direction #3: Create More Opportunities to Eat Well and Be Active

Even when people have skills and knowledge, they face barriers including a lack of time, money and access to opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity. When affordable and appealing options are available in the places we live, learn, commute, work and play, we can build healthy eating and physical activity into our daily routines. *Thrive!* includes actions ranging from supporting healthy eating policies in child-care, schools, sport and recreation settings, and other public institutions, to providing more affordable programming in the critical after-school time period.

Direction #4: Plan and Build Healthier Communities

The way our cities, towns, and communities are designed affects our health. Things like good public transit, well-maintained parks, community gardens, farmers markets, and safe, efficient walking and cycling networks make it easier for people of all ages to be healthier. *Thrive!* includes actions to develop a provincial active transportation policy and plan, work with municipalities on land use policy to support physical activity and healthy eating, expand physical activity leadership programs into all municipalities and Mi'kmaq communities, and increase access to facilities and places to be active.

These four strategic directions require a foundation of strong social policy to support families, increase equity, and ensure that the health of Nova Scotians is considered in all major government policies. The directions are supported by a broad engagement strategy that will celebrate diversity and build on success, and a plan to report regularly to the public on progress.