



A HEALTHIER RECOVERY FOR BC



“ HEALTHY CITIZENS ARE THE GREATEST ASSET ANY COUNTRY
CAN HAVE. – WINSTON CHURCHILL ”

A Healthier Recovery

Living through this pandemic has been incredibly trying for all of us.

We've had to make sacrifices in order **to protect our collective health and face hard truths about injustices** that exist in our society.

As we plan for a full reopening, many British Columbians expect a recovery plan that will respond to lessons from our COVID-19 experience.

For the BC Alliance for Healthy Living (BCAHL), this pandemic experience underscores **the importance of disease prevention**. Never in our lifetimes have we more clearly witnessed how good public health practice and policy can save lives.

Chronic diseases, such as cancer, type 2 diabetes and heart and lung diseases, affect **one in three British Columbians** and are the leading causes of premature death in BC and Canada. Much of that disease burden is avoidable – **it is estimated that between 50% and 80% of chronic disease could be prevented**.

COVID-19 has illuminated gaps and challenges but **adversity can also present opportunities** to do things differently. Prioritizing **investment in a healthy recovery** will put us in a stronger position for the challenges ahead.

How Has the Pandemic Affected Our Health?

In June 2021, we surveyed British Columbians to understand how the pandemic has impacted their health and well-being. We also asked what policy measures they support to address some of the current challenges our society is facing.¹

Not surprisingly, we saw there were both positive and negative impacts. However, more negative impacts were experienced by people with low incomes, young adults, families and those from racialized communities.

The majority of British Columbians (86%) indicate that their eating and drinking habits have changed since COVID-19, with most making a mix of positive and negative changes (45%) or solely positive adjustments (31%). Notably, compared to before the pandemic, people are eating homemade meals and fruits and vegetables but also more processed snack food. Despite the improvements, only 7% are eating the recommended 5+ servings of produce per day.

Most adults (78%) have been reasonably active through the pandemic which may reflect the success of investments made in BC's Physical Activity Strategy, Active People, Active Places. However, over half of parents said that their children were not active enough to meet the minimum recommendations for healthy child development.

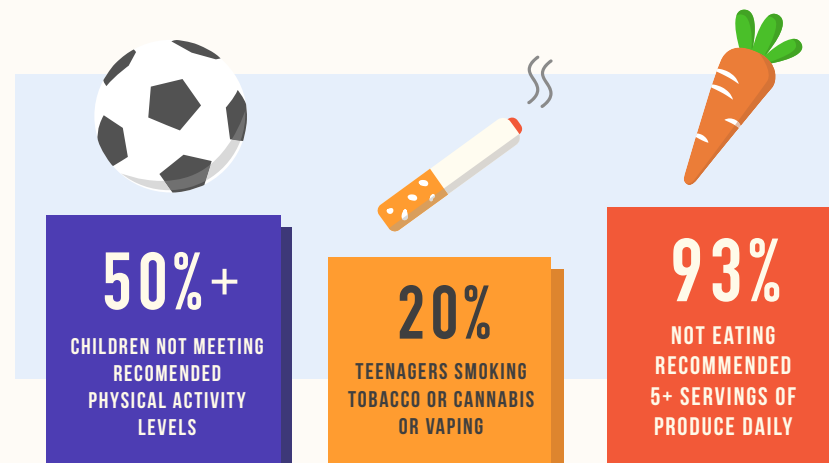
Smoking and vaping also worsened. Sixteen percent of BC adults smoked or vaped in a typical week, most commonly, tobacco (10%) or cannabis (9%). This goes up to 20% among teenagers (aged 13-17) according to their parents; unfortunately they are smoking more tobacco and vaping products than adults.

Looking ahead, BC residents have a rosier outlook on life after COVID-19. Nearly half (48%) expect only improvements to their lifestyle, health, relationships, and/or finances, while only 3% expect to experience declines and 36% expect a combination of both.

When asked to name, in their own words, one policy, group or challenge that should be the focus for improving health and wellness in BC, most British Columbians said that mental health was the highest priority, followed by healthy eating, physical activity and then affordable housing. The commentary around this spanned a variety of issues but one of the most dominant themes was the importance of improving affordability and accessibility.

“**MOST BRITISH COLUMBIANS SAID THAT MENTAL HEALTH WAS THE HIGHEST PRIORITY FOLLOWED BY HEALTHY EATING, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THEN AFFORDABLE HOUSING**”

People across our province are enthusiastic about policies and programs that can help to prevent chronic disease and improve equity. This may be because there has been so much focus on disease prevention, wellness and social justice since the start of the pandemic, or it simply may be that people are ready for a bolder and more proactive approach to health.



¹1,007 BC adults aged 19+ participated in the survey conducted by Sentsis in June, 2021. The survey was sample weighted by age and gender within the region to reflect the adult population in BC. Total results are accurate to ±3.1% (19 times out of 20).

MENTAL WELLNESS

The pandemic has magnified mental health concerns for British Columbians. Even before COVID-19, there was a chorus of voices from across the province calling for more community-based mental health services.

The widespread decline in mental wellness as a result of the enormous stress that came with COVID-19 has made mental health a top concern for British Columbians. There is near unanimous support (90%) for increasing the availability of mental health and wellness programs in communities.

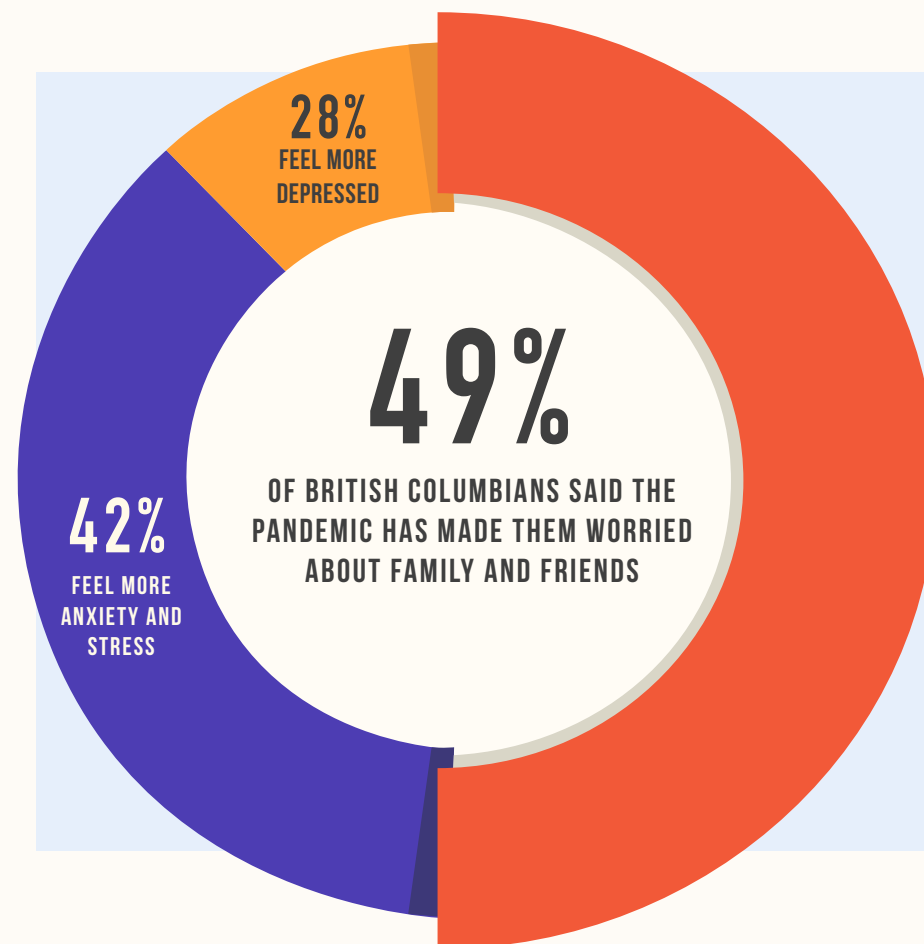
“**THERE IS NEAR UNANIMOUS SUPPORT (90%)**
FOR INCREASING AVAILABILITY OF MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS IN COMMUNITIES.”

- 49% of British Columbians said the pandemic has made them worried about family and friends;
- 42% feel more anxiety and stress;
- and 28% feel more depressed.

PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

A healthy recovery requires investment in a holistic approach that combines healthy living policies and programs to support wellness along with a mental health care system that is accessible to all British Columbians that need it, when they need it.

Healthy living conditions and practices can also boost resilience and promote positive mental wellness. Income security, affordable housing, a nutritious diet and regular activity can reduce the stress hormones that exacerbate anxiety and depression and improve mental health.



EATING FOR HEALTH

Baking bread and creating plant-based meals at home seemed to be a pandemic hobby across media channels. However, behind the screens, most British Columbians were not eating well at all.

Although many said they were making homemade meals and eating fruits and vegetables more often, on average that amounted to just two servings of fruits and veggies daily – less than half of what is recommended.

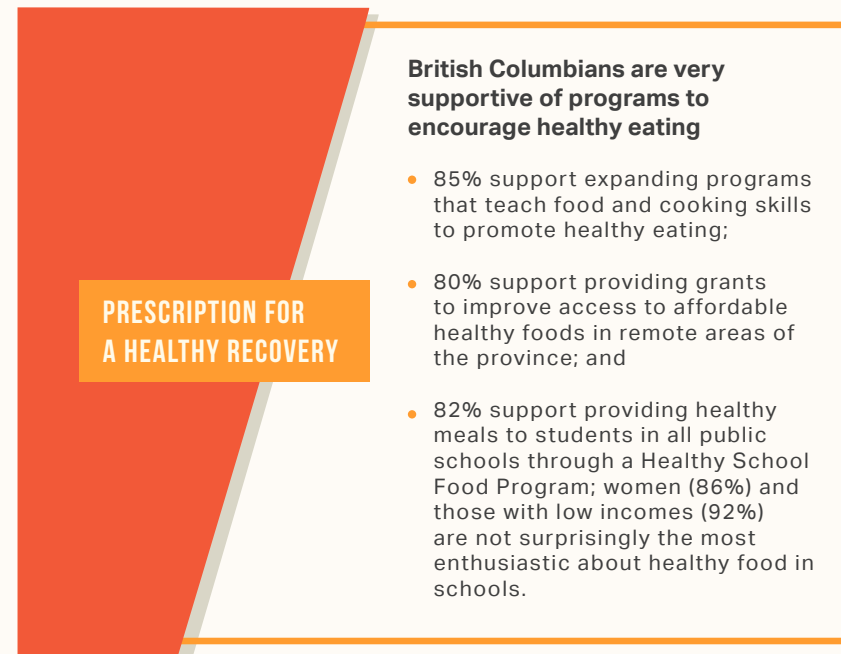
This is a serious problem. A healthy diet protects against numerous chronic conditions including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer.



“ A HEALTHY DIET PROTECTS AGAINST NUMEROUS CHRONIC CONDITIONS INCLUDING CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE, TYPE 2 DIABETES AND CANCER. ”

Younger adults between the ages of 19-34, Indigenous people and those with Southeast Asian backgrounds were far more likely to say that the pandemic had a negative impact on their eating habits. Young adults ate fewer vegetables and fruit, and all these groups ate more processed cooked and snack foods and drank more sugary drinks.

A third of British Columbians say that healthy food is not affordable; but nearly half of all people in the lowest income group and 64% of Indigenous people say it's difficult to pay for healthy basics such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains and proteins.



PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

British Columbians are very supportive of programs to encourage healthy eating

- 85% support expanding programs that teach food and cooking skills to promote healthy eating;
- 80% support providing grants to improve access to affordable healthy foods in remote areas of the province; and
- 82% support providing healthy meals to students in all public schools through a Healthy School Food Program; women (86%) and those with low incomes (92%) are not surprisingly the most enthusiastic about healthy food in schools.

ACTIVE FOR LIFE

The rise of the pandemic led to lockdowns and physical distancing regulations that constrained our movement; but fortunately, many of us still found ways to keep active. Whether this was a result of having extra time or the need for a coping strategy — maintenance of physical activity throughout the pandemic protected those who were active from severe COVID-19 outcomes while also promoting mental wellness.

“ MAINTENANCE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC PROMOTED MENTAL WELLNESS. ”

Most adults (78%) in BC continued to be moderately active despite the lack of access to gyms, community centres and other recreation facilities. Overall, nearly a third of British Columbians said that they became more active during the pandemic. More people increased moderate physical activity (43%) including walking and biking (31%) but in the same time period nearly a third said they decreased vigorous exercise.

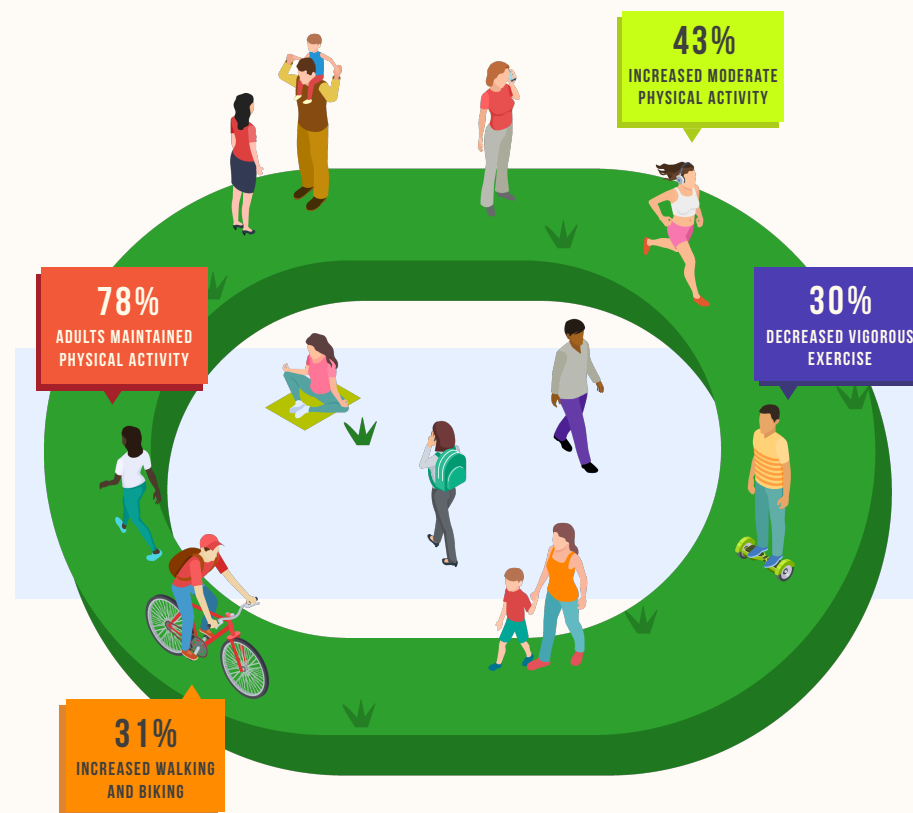
British Columbians see the importance of investing in physical activity programs and infrastructure.

- 89% support increasing the accessibility of adaptive equipment and programs so individuals living with disabilities have opportunities to be physically active;
- 86% support funding municipalities to update recreation facilities, such as building new playgrounds, renovating aging pools and arenas, maintaining parks, tennis courts and sports fields;
- 84% support building more 'active transportation' infrastructure – safe routes and trails for walking, biking and wheelchairs; and
- 84% support funding for more low-cost physical activity programming in community centres.

PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

Overall this is good news and is consistent with previous national studies that show British Columbians tend to be more active than others in Canada. This speaks to a culture that embraces activity but also is a credit to BC's Physical Activity Strategy that invested in programs to get more people moving, more often.

However, there are some concerning trends. Over 50% of parents report that their children are not active for an hour daily – which means most are not meeting the minimum recommendations for healthy child development. Inactive adults tend to be younger adults, singles, family with children under 18, those with Indigenous or Chinese background, Northern residents and low-income households (\$30k or less).



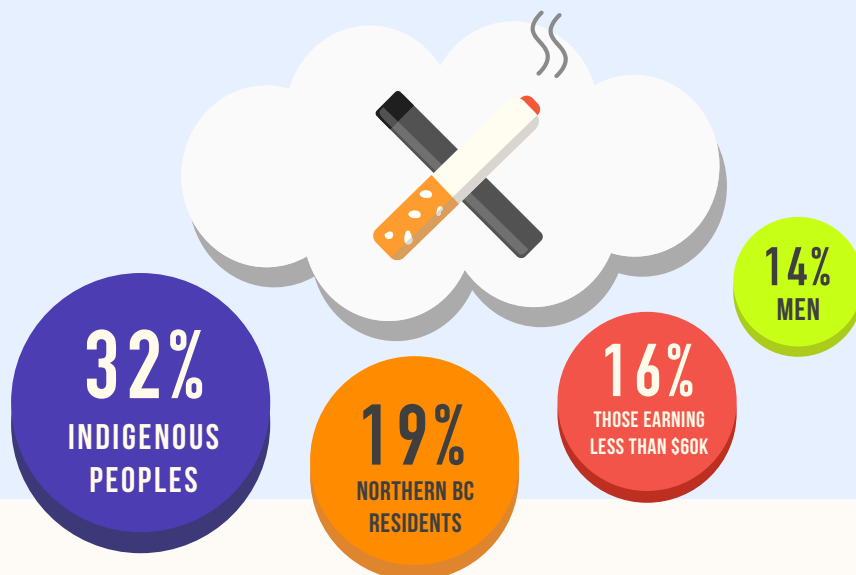
SMOKING AND VAPING

Tobacco, vaping and cannabis use are associated with stress; but large social shifts can also prompt the first steps towards quitting, so the pandemic has provided conditions conducive to both excessive use and quitting. Since the start of the pandemic, 8% of BC residents increased their smoking or vaping while 5% decreased these habits.

Overall 16% of BC adults said they had smoked or vaped in the past 7 days – most commonly, tobacco (10%) or cannabis (9%). One-fifth of parents report that their teenagers (aged 13-17) have smoked or vaped in the past week. Vaping continues to be more of an issue for teenagers (17%) than it is for adults (5%). Teenagers are more likely than adults to have vaped with nicotine (9%), to have smoked (12%) and to have smoked or vaped cannabis (14%) in the past week.

Smoking is highest among Indigenous peoples (32%), in Northern BC (19%), those earning less than \$60K (16%) and men (14%). Exposure to second-hand smoke is highest among people who identify as South Asian, East Asian and Southeast Asian (27%-29%), as well as young to middle-aged adults (26%) and those earning less than \$30K (28%).

SMOKING IS HIGHEST AMONG:



Over the past generation, we have made significant progress in reducing tobacco, but complacency will only lead to more disease and premature death. The explosive growth in vaping among young people has altered the landscape of this issue and health experts are worried that smoking will increase alongside nicotine addiction in the next generation.

“ WE HAVE MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS IN REDUCING TOBACCO, BUT COMPLACENCY WILL ONLY LEAD TO MORE DISEASE AND PREMATURE DEATH. ”

Other jurisdictions, such as the USA and PEI, have raised the legal age of purchase to 21. This policy direction is based on brain development research and as a way to limit social sources to youth. Teen brains are susceptible to nicotine addiction and simultaneously have an under-developed prefrontal cortex which hurts their ability to plan and make good decisions.

PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

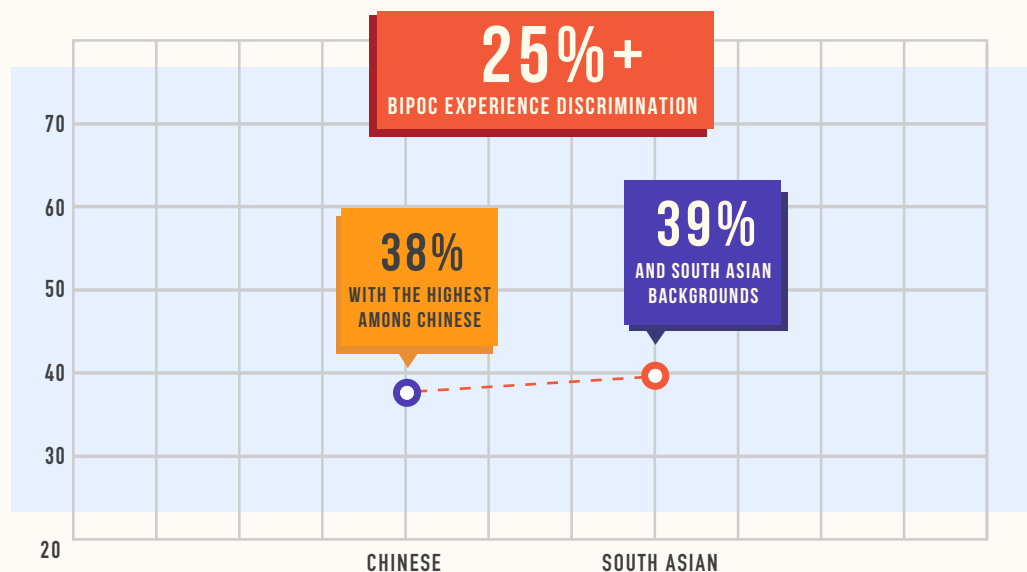
British Columbians support measures to reduce exposure to second-hand smoke and to decrease youth access to harmful nicotine products.

- 77% approve of a ban on smoking in multi-unit homes such as condos and townhouses. The support for this measure is highest among people that experience higher exposure rates such as South Asians (82%), Chinese (83%) and East Asians (92%).
- 72% approve of raising the legal smoking age to 21. The support for this measure is also higher among Indigenous people (81%) as well as among families with children under 18 (77%).

WELL-BEING FOR ALL

In the beginning of the pandemic, there was a sense of solidarity as we united against an invisible virus that threatened us all; people cheered for healthcare workers and others ran errands for house-bound neighbours. As time went on, cracks and divisions showed up; it became apparent that risks and suffering were not shared equally.

More than a quarter of people from all visible minority groups said that they experience discrimination occasionally or often. This was highest among people of Chinese (38%) and South Asian origin (39%) which is sadly not surprising given the anti-Asian hate that surrounded speculation about the origin of coronavirus and blame for community spread.



This survey demonstrated the divisions among socioeconomic lines that contribute to poorer health. Those in the lowest income groups were more likely to have lost a job or income, more likely to be stressed or anxious, to eat fewer fruits and veggies and to find healthy food unaffordable. They also smoke more, are exposed to second-hand smoke more often and are less active.

These socio-economic inequities have significant health consequences and are estimated to increase healthcare costs by 20%. One study that linked health and income records for 16 years showed that lower income British Columbians are between 24% - 91% more likely to die early from chronic disease compared to people with average incomes.

“ **THESE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUITIES HAVE SIGNIFICANT HEALTH CONSEQUENCES AND ARE ESTIMATED TO INCREASE HEALTHCARE COSTS BY 20%.** ”

After so much strife and division, we will all have to work to repair the tears in our social fabric. Government can play an important role by building on efforts to promote diversity and support inclusion and reconciliation.

British Columbians care for the wellbeing of others in their community and are supportive of measures to lessen poverty and improve equity.

- 80% support increasing Disability and Income Assistance rates to keep up with the real cost of healthy food and rental housing;
- 85% want to see an increase in the supply of affordable housing; and
- 90% think it's important to ensure everyone can access necessary prescription medication.

PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

This pandemic has left an indelible mark on children that will undoubtedly define and shape this generation of young people. They've had so much taken away from them — playdates, recreational activities, birthday parties, visits with extended family, even their sense of security.

Parents are anxious or stressed (52%) juggling work, scrambling for childcare on top of all their other responsibilities, while worrying and caring for their kids who are experiencing their own personal struggles with the pandemic. Over a third of parents (36%) say their children show signs of depression or anxiety and 14% say their children experience discrimination at least once a week.

According to parents, most children aged 5-17 currently are not getting enough fruit and veggies in their diet (57%), 30% eat processed snack food more than 5 days a week and 15% consume sugary drinks almost every day.

PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

British Columbians overwhelmingly support initiatives to support the health and well-being of children and youth.

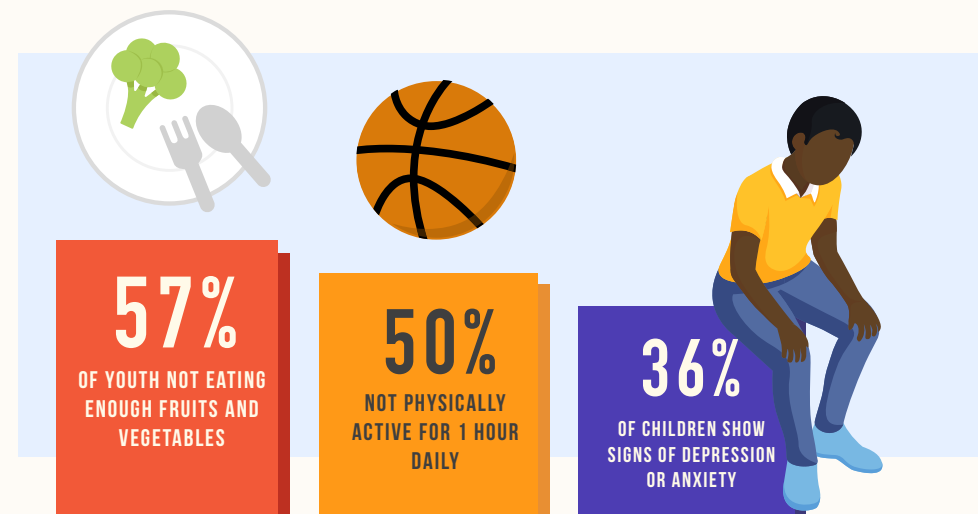
- 82% support providing healthy meals to students in all public schools through a Healthy School Food Program. Women (86%), those with low incomes (92%) and of South Asian (90%) and Southeast Asian (92%) backgrounds are most enthusiastic about healthy food in schools.
- 80% support subsidizing sport and organized physical activity programs for low-income families. This is especially popular among those with low income (88%), of South Asian backgrounds (90%) and Indigenous people (95%).
- 73% champion more affordable childcare for families. 81% of families with children under 18 support expanding the availability of \$10/day daycare spaces.

Less than half of children and youth are physically active for an hour a day. The majority of children are spending more times on screens than is recommended and a third of parents say non-school screen time has increased.

Teenagers (aged 13-17) are much more likely to have made unhealthy changes compared to younger children (aged 5-12) when it comes to increased non-school related screen time, lack of physical activity, eating more processed snack food and not getting enough sleep.

These numbers are concerning as it means that half of BC children are not meeting the guidelines for food and activity that are recommended for healthy development.

“ HALF OF BC CHILDREN ARE NOT MEETING THE GUIDELINES FOR FOOD AND ACTIVITY THAT ARE RECOMMENDED FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT. ”



PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY RECOVERY

British Columbians continue to feel the weight of the pandemic even as some restrictions are lifted. Yet, it is likely that we won't understand the full effect of this disease for many years to come.

There is no shortage of ideas or advice on remedies for our recovery. 'Build back better' is a common refrain. We urge decision makers to prioritize health in BC's recovery plans and to invest in actions that will make us all healthier and stronger – starting with the people that have been hit the hardest by this pandemic.



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We have put British Columbians at the centre of our prescription for a healthy recovery. The policies, programs and investments listed in this brief are those that rose to the top when British Columbians were asked to choose from a menu of options that have been advanced by health leaders. British Columbians have made it clear that they value health and efforts to ensure everyone is supported and has an equal chance to lead a healthy life.

With health we have the strength and resilience to face future challenges and accomplish our other goals and aspirations. We can beat back this pandemic and beat back chronic disease by investing in policies and programs that will secure a healthier recovery for all.



MENTAL HEALTH

- Increase the availability of **mental health and wellness programs** in communities.



HEALTHY FOOD

- Establish a universal **Healthy School Food Program** for all public schools.
- Expand the delivery of programs that **teach food and cooking skills** to promote healthy eating.
- Provide grants to improve **access to affordable healthy foods** in remote areas of the province.



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Provide **additional funding** to support BC's Physical Activity Strategy, 'Active People, Active Places and Active Transportation Strategy, 'Move. Commute Connect.
- Expedite the building of more **'active transportation' infrastructure** –safe routes and trails for walking, biking and wheelchairs.
- Provide funding for **more low-cost physical activity programming**. Subsidize sport and organized physical activity programs for low-income families.
- Provide funding for municipalities **to update recreation facilities** such as building new playgrounds, renovating aging pools and arenas, maintaining parks, tennis courts and sports fields.
- Increase the **accessibility of adaptive equipment and programs** so disabled individuals have opportunities to be physically active.



TOBACCO & VAPING

- Apply a ban on **smoking in multi-unit homes** such as condos and townhouses.
- Raise the legal smoking and vaping **age to 21**.



SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

- **Increase Disability and Income Assistance rates** to keep up with the real cost of healthy food and rental housing. Start by increasing rates to the poverty line as determined by current Market Basket Measure Thresholds.
- Increase in the **supply of affordable housing**.
- Provide **universal access** to prescription medication.
- Expand the availability of **\$10/day daycare spaces**.



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