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# Barriers to and enablers of achieving a healthy diet in Tasmanian adults

THE TASMANIA PROJECT REPORT 62

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# Acknowledgment of Country

The University of Tasmania pays its respects to elders past and present and to the many Aboriginal people that did not make elder status and to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community that continues to care for Country. We acknowledge the profound effect of climate change on this Country and seek to work alongside Tasmanian Aboriginal communities, with their deep wisdom and knowledge, to address climate change and its impacts.

The Palawa people belong to one of the world's oldest living cultures, continually resident on this Country for over 65,000 years. They have survived and adapted to significant climate changes over this time, such as sea-level rise and extreme rainfall variability, and as such embody thousands of generations of intimate place-based knowledge.

We acknowledge with deep respect that this knowledge represents a range of cultural practices, wisdom, traditions, and ways of knowing the world that provide accurate and useful climate change information, observations, and solutions.

The University of Tasmania likewise recognises a history of truth that acknowledges the impacts of invasion and colonisation upon Aboriginal people, resulting in forcible removal from their lands.

Our island is deeply unique, with cities and towns surrounded by spectacular landscapes of bushland, waterways, mountain ranges, and beaches.

The University of Tasmania stands for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language, and history, and a continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future.

# Key findings

The Tasmania Project Cost of Living Survey (TTP8) was open between 21 September and 9 October 2022. It asked about how Tasmanians are coping with the increased costs of living, measured food insecurity using a validated survey tool, and asked people about their diet and how they maintain it.

This report presents analysis of two open-ended questions posed to people: “What in your life makes it difficult to eat a healthy diet?” and “What in your life helps you to eat a healthy diet?”

## BARRIERS TO EATING A HEALTHY DIET

Many barriers to eating a healthy diet were reported, the most common being a lack of money and time to prepare and eat healthy food. For example:

- Some people reported difficulty in accessing food, for example struggling to travel to food suppliers and also to afford healthy food, which reduced their overall ability to consume a healthy diet. Related to this, increases in the cost of food were felt and cited as a barrier to healthy diet.
- Respondents reported difficulty consuming a healthy diet when they experienced health challenges like work stress or poor mental health. Some who reported reduced overall wellbeing reported having trouble regulating their appetite and often made unhealthy food choices.
- Social influences, such as living alone, and the eating preferences of others also affected healthy food choices for some. A minority of respondents reported they were not motivated to eat healthy diets.

## ENABLERS OF EATING A HEALTHY DIET

The most important enablers to achieving a healthy diet were having sufficient funds and time to prepare healthy meals, in addition to social influences that supported people to make healthy food choices. For example:

- Some respondents reported having adequate time and money, meaning that physical and financial access to food wasn't an issue for them. When these conditions were met, achieving a healthy diet was possible.
- Others reported the importance of having enough time to plan, prepare and cook healthy food in well-equipped kitchens to help them eat a healthy diet. Some Tasmanians loved cooking and eating well.
- Proximity to food was considered important, including locally grown and home-grown foods.
- Social support was important for some to be motivated to eat a healthy diet whereas others were motivated by personal health reasons.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 THE TASMANIA PROJECT COST OF LIVING SURVEY (TTP8)

The Tasmania Project Cost of Living Survey (TTP8) was open between 21 September and 9 October 2022. The survey asked respondents, Tasmanians aged 18 and over, a variety of questions about how they were coping with rising costs of living (for an overview of the full survey results see the [report by Seivwright & Kocar \(2022\)](#)). The survey also used the USDA Household Food Security Survey Module 6-item short form to determine the prevalence and severity of food insecurity and asked a series of questions about people's diets, including facilitators of and barriers to achieving a healthy diet.

A total of 1,284 responses were collected. The sample was more than two-thirds female (67.8%), skewed older (53.0% aged 55 and over), and educated (87.3% with post-secondary qualifications). Half the sample resided in the Hobart Statistical Area Level 4 (SA4), 19.5% in Launceston and North East, 17.8% in West and North West and 11.1% in South East. The data were weighted against these variables to ensure that the sample is more demographically representative of Tasmanian residents, overall. For detailed information about the methodology used to weight the data, please see the accompanying [Technical Report](#) (Kocar, 2022).

## 1.2 THIS REPORT

This report explores the enabling factors and the barriers respondents reported facing when trying to eat a healthy diet. Two free text questions allowed respondents to answer the questions "What in your life makes it difficult to eat a healthy diet?" and "What in your life helps you to eat a healthy diet?". Responses to these questions were coded thematically and are presented in a synthesis below.

## 1.3 BRIEF BACKGROUND OF FOOD AND DIET IN TASMANIA

Tasmania has the second-highest prevalence of diet-related chronic diseases in Australia (1) with nearly 30% of the Tasmanian population reporting at least one chronic disease (2). Previous research has shown that the diet quality of Tasmanians is generally poor (3-8) when compared to the recommendations outlined in the Australian Dietary Guidelines (9). Further, The Tasmania Project has reported persistently high levels of food insecurity in Tasmania since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (10-12), indicating that a substantial number of Tasmanians are struggling to put healthy food on the table every day.

Challenges with food access and supply related to the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, rising inflation continue to impact Tasmanians in 2023 (11). In fact, Hobart recorded the highest annual inflation among Australian capital cities of 8.6% in the year to September 2022, with inflation being particularly high in the food components of the Consumer Price Index (13). Despite this, the range of factors affecting Tasmanians' ability to eat a healthy diet have not been previously investigated from a consumer perspective, prompting our investigation. Understanding the factors that impact dietary behaviours, from the perspective of Tasmanians, could guide community and government responses to improve the health of the population.

## 2. Barriers to eating a healthy diet

The survey received 1,137 responses to the open-ended question “What in your life makes it difficult to eat a healthy diet?”. Five primary themes were identified, outlined in Figure 1 and in the narrative synthesis below.

Figure 1: Main themes identified as barriers for healthy eating in Tasmania



### 2.1 RESOURCE LIMITATIONS

The main barrier to eating a healthy diet in our study was a lack of resources such as time and money. For those who reported either a low income or a lack of adequate money, eating healthy food regularly was especially challenging. When these factors were coupled with the “*increasing cost of living*” (Female, aged 36, location not disclosed) and when “*quality food and fresh produce are expensive*” (Female, age not disclosed, Greater Hobart), challenges with financial access to food were magnified.

***“I can't afford fresh food and meat. Money!!!”***

Female, aged 36, Greater Hobart

Many Tasmanians also reported being time-poor, with “a lack of time to prepare meals” (Female, aged 23, Greater Hobart), often attributed to excessive work commitments. Those with caring responsibilities whilst working also faced increased obstacles to eating a healthy diet:

***“Long work hours and kids sporting commitments mean there is no time to prepare healthy meals some days...”***

Female, aged 38, South East

Some survey respondents also reported dealing with living space challenges such as “nowhere to store lots of food” (Female, aged 74, Launceston and North East). One person said the challenges relate to:

***“Having a place to cook fresh food... to store fresh food... to eat with the lights on, to be warm, to not be eating potato cakes in the front seat of my car.”***

Male, aged 36, Greater Hobart

## 2.2 FOOD ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES

Food environment challenges was a prominent theme incorporating increased cost of healthy food items and reduced ability to physically access them. Food access was reported to be a substantial barrier to eating healthy food for many Tasmanians. The cost of produce was found to be a major hindrance with numerous respondents stating that the cost of fruit, vegetables and meat specifically was too expensive, making it very difficult to eat a healthy diet.

***“It's just really hard to buy enough vegetables to make healthy meals - e.g. to make one meal between people for a few days can sometimes cost up to \$40 just for the ingredients. The fruit and veg is the most expensive part.”***

Gender not disclosed, aged 25, Greater Hobart

Further, elevated healthy food prices led many respondents to purchase unhealthier foods instead as they were more affordable:

***“It is cheaper to buy a litre of coke than it is to buy water!”***

Male, aged 61, Launceston and North East

***“... I can buy a pack of 6 doughnuts from Woolworths for \$2 when on special or 6 apples for \$6.50... too often the deciding factor is money and feeling full”***

Female, aged 64, Greater Hobart

Rurality was also an issue in accessing food. For some individuals, living in, for example, a “remote location” (Male, aged 64, West and North West) meant accessing fresh food for a healthy diet was challenging due to both the distance from and ability to travel to fresh food suppliers:

***“Poor state of the roads, cost of petrol and distance to shops as I live in a rural area”***

Female, aged 63, South East

## 2.3 MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Many respondents acknowledged factors related to health and wellbeing that acted as barriers to consuming a healthy diet. Lower mental wellbeing was identified as a major obstacle.

***“When I’m depressed I reach for foods that I shouldn’t...”***

Female, aged 70, West and North West

Individuals experiencing excess stress or those with a pre-existing mental health condition experienced disturbances in appetite leading to poorer food choices.

***“Over eating from stress being a business owner.”***

Male, aged 42, Launceston and North East

Some people reported that a physical illness or disability was a hindrance to eating a healthy diet. Many people also stated that feeling a lack of energy, particularly for those working long hours, made it extremely difficult to prepare and cook healthy meals.

***“When I feel tired and overwhelmed and can’t fight my urge to binge eat.”***

Female, aged 34, Greater Hobart

A small number of Tasmanians also reported concerns regarding weight gain. One participant said that they didn't wish to eat a healthy diet, as recommended in public health nutrition guidelines, as it *"...contains more food than I need to maintain a 'healthy' weight."* (Female, aged 69, Greater Hobart).

### 2.3 SOCIAL INFLUENCES

A wide range of social influences, such as work pressure, living alone and the eating preferences of those they live with negatively impacted people's ability to consume a healthy diet. Several participants identified that an increased workload or altered work hours such as *"shift work"* (Male, aged 49, West and North West) made it more difficult to make time to organise and eat healthy lunches:

***"Busy work environment, don't take the time to prepare healthy lunch."***

Female, aged 59, South East

Those living with friends or family also felt that the eating preferences and habits of individuals in their household negatively impacted their ability to consume a healthy diet:

***"My housemate is fussy so I cook and eat what she has and only occasionally cook and eat the food I want to eat myself."***

Male, aged 50, West and North West

***"Have a fussy husband! Am not cooking 2 different meals."***

Female, aged 77, Greater Hobart

People living alone faced unique difficulties eating a healthy diet with several participants revealing that they were *"not interested in food."* (Female, aged 73, Greater Hobart) or lacked the motivation to cook healthy food altogether:

***"Living alone makes motivation to prepare a good meal hard... the work and clean up can't be shared so it is tempting to have quick meals which may not be as healthy."***

Male, aged 59, West and North West



## 2.4 INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATION AND PREFERENCES

Numerous Tasmanians believed that their personal attributes and attitudes were the primary reason they were unable to eat a healthy diet. A considerable number of participants labelled themselves as *“just being lazy”* (Male, 82, Greater Hobart), having a *“lack of will power”* (Female, aged 51, Greater Hobart) or *“lack of self control. Discipline”* (Female, aged 59, West and North West) which meant they didn't always consume healthy food.

Many respondents also stated that having *“a sweet tooth”* (Female, aged 52, West and North West) or an *“addiction to sugar”* (Male, aged 47, Launceston and North East), specifically *“chocolate cravings”* (Female, aged 72, South East), made it more challenging to eat a healthy diet. Additionally, a small number of individuals advised that they didn't like the taste of healthy food:

***“I don't like fruit. I like chocolate too much.”***

Female, age not disclosed, West and North West

Restrictive diets due to food allergies, intolerances or altered eating caused by a pre-existing health condition, such as cancer, were also obstacles to eating a healthy diet for some Tasmanians:

***“Intolerances to foods that are healthy for most people, including most fruits and dark, leafy greens.”***

Female, aged 44, Launceston and North East

***“a) Cancer has affected my organs ability to process some foods and b) I am on gluten free, dairy free and FODMAP diets so pretty restricted in what I can eat and the quantity of food”***

Female, aged 62, Greater Hobart

### 3. Enablers of eating a healthy diet

The survey received 1,127 responses to the question “What in your life helps you to eat a healthy diet?”. Six key themes were identified, outlined in Figure 2 and in the following synthesis.

Figure 2 Enabling factors that support Tasmanians to eat a healthy diet



#### 3.1 FOOD PURCHASING AND PLANNING

The most prominent theme identified as enabling a healthy diet was having adequate funds and time to buy and prepare healthy meals. Many people reported being in a situation of “*having money for higher quality ingredients*” (Female, aged 26, Greater Hobart) and “*being able to afford decent food*” (Female, aged 39, Launceston and North East) which substantially increased some Tasmanians’ ability to eat a healthy diet.

***“Affordable accessible fresh fruit, veg, local animal products. Having time to prepare tasty meals.”***

Female, aged 38, Greater Hobart

Finances when combined with *“time to prepare and shop for good food.”* (Female, aged 53, Greater Hobart), enhanced people’s ability to consume a healthy diet through sufficient time to make use of the food they had purchased.

***“More time in day to prepare and more income would be helpful.”***

Female, aged 46, West and North West

Planning and “preparing food in advance” (Female, aged 45, West and North West) were identified as major enablers. Several respondents explained that *“planning ahead.”* (Female, aged 72, Greater Hobart) increased the likelihood that they were able to eat a healthy diet:

***“Establishing a regular routine and being organised. Preparing meals for the week in advance. Freezing lunches and snacks.”***

Female, aged 46, Greater Hobart

Some respondents also felt that they had a good level of knowledge of *“what a healthy diet looks like”* (Female, aged 78, Greater Hobart) and *“knowing the importance of a healthy diet for good overall wellbeing”* (Male, aged 75, Greater Hobart), which was an enabler to consuming a healthy diet.

### 3.2 ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Environmental and social factors is a theme that incorporates social support systems and concerns for the wider community that encouraged an individual to eat a healthy diet. Social support, including from spouses, enabled numerous respondents to consume a healthy diet. The support provided ranged from cooking for, or shopping with individuals but also emotional support and encouragement from partners:

***“My partner encouraging us to eat healthier.”***

Female, aged 28, South East

***“My wife provides a healthier menu than I tend to provide when it’s my turn.”***

Male, aged 64, South East

Other support specified by respondents included friends and family in general. Some people affirmed that friends provided not only company when eating but also supplied healthy foods and offered assistance with cooking and shopping:

***“Living with friends who can help with the cooking and purchasing of food.”***

Female, aged 24, Greater Hobart

A small number of Tasmanians were also able to eat a healthy diet when they minimised their exposure to advertising and the news.

***“Not watching the news.”***

Female, aged 63, West and North West

Sustainability concerns including the impact their food choices had on climate change influenced some people to eat healthier too.

***“... Our resulting diet is whole food and plant based. Not only has this resulted in a huge increase in health and vitality, it's probably the single most powerful thing an individual can do to address climate change.”***

Female, aged 58, South East

### 3.3 FOOD ACCESS

Being able to easily access healthy ingredients was a major enabler in consuming a healthy diet. Individuals acknowledged that if they lived closer to fresh food producers and/or suppliers within their community, or if they could select fresh fruit and vegetables from their own gardens, they found it easier to eat a healthy diet.

***“Proximity to great supermarkets and green grocers.”***

Female, aged 50, Launceston and North East

***“We buy locally grown vegetables from friends and the community gardens, we also grow our own.”***

Female, aged 64, West and North West

Some respondents also felt that by restricting their access to discretionary items they were more likely to eat a healthy diet. People were able to limit their intake by only keeping healthy foods in their house or reducing the number of times they ate out or drove past takeaway outlets:

***“I don’t keep unhealthy foods in the house.”***

Female, aged 63, Greater Hobart

***“... working at home so I don’t go past stores & bakeries & get unhealthy food.”***

Female, aged 52, Greater Hobart

Being able to successfully grow their own produce either throughout the year or during specific seasons made it considerably easier for many Tasmanians to access and eat a healthy diet. Foods grown ranged from *“Growing my own salads”* (Female, aged 56, Greater Hobart) to being able to *“breed animals for meat”* (Female, aged 60, West and North West).

***“Having a large garden with established fruit, nut and herb gardens. Having a poly tunnel to extend our growing season. Netted enclosures for soft fruits.”***

Male, aged 44, West and North West

### 3.4 HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Feeling well was identified as an important motivating factor for many respondents, with some reporting *“Feeling better when I do eat healthy”* (Male, aged 43, Greater Hobart). Other reasons for eating a healthy diet included *“not spending a fortune on medical expenses”* (Male, aged 65, Greater Hobart) and *“to live longer”* (Female, aged 83, Launceston and North East).

***“Wanting to be healthy and fit to live to 100+”***

Male, aged 79, Greater Hobart

Additionally, a small number of respondents also reported that consuming a healthy diet enabled them *“to improve my health and appearance”* (Female, aged 29, Launceston and North East) as well as *“wanting to look and feel good”* (Female, aged 19, Greater Hobart).

***“Looking in mirrors and getting on the scales!”***

Male, aged 66, Greater Hobart

A number of individuals also stated that having a physical fitness goal or generally being active assisted them in eating a healthy diet and acknowledged that they needed to do so in order to have *“the energy to exercise”* (Female, aged 74, Greater Hobart).

***“Getting exercise makes me want for healthier food to refuel.”***

Male, aged 33, Greater Hobart

### 3.5 FOOD SKILLS AND ENJOYMENT

Cooking skills were seen as important in order to consume a healthy diet. Participants found that *“being a competent cook”* (Female, aged 66, Greater Hobart) and *“being able to cook a full meal that includes vegetables”* (Female, aged 26, Greater Hobart) greatly increased the likelihood of eating a healthy diet.

***“... I've been cooking healthy food all my life. I learned to cook at home and at school. I have never had to worry about money to buy food but I've also learned to be economical and to cook simple meals”***

Female, aged 73, Greater Hobart

Intertwined with the social support sub theme, those who cooked with or cooked for their household also increased their healthy food consumption:

***“Sharing the cooking and shopping with my flatmate. We look after each other”***

Female, aged 40, Greater Hobart

***“Cooking for the children.”***

Male, aged 33, West and North West

Several participants indicated that *“enjoying cooking”* (Female, aged 26, Greater Hobart) not only for themselves but others as well, also helped them eat a healthy diet, as well as experimenting with different recipes.

***“Enjoying cooking. I am very good at utilising whatever ingredients are affordable to me.”***

Female, aged 26, Greater Hobart

***“...enjoying cooking and experimenting with new recipes”***

Female, aged 60, Greater Hobart

## 4. Where next?

Our results show that despite some supportive factors, many Tasmanians face a range of challenges when trying to eat a healthy diet. While providing a useful perspective, some more research may be required to understand which of barriers or enablers are deciding factors in determining Tasmanian’s healthy food choices.

Our results point to practical strategies that could enhance the enabling factors and reduce the barriers to adopting a healthy diet within the Tasmanian context. For example, a range of community education programs on meal planning, time management, cooking with and for families, growing your own fruit and vegetables and community market gardens could strengthen nutrition knowledge and support healthy eating for individuals at risk of poor diet quality. Further, assessing how the physical food environment can be changed to support the availability and access to a range of more healthy food options could be warranted. Lastly, as the main barrier to healthy eating was cost, strategies that work towards reducing the cost of food, especially for people on low incomes may be useful. These could include state-level funding for community led and driven food social enterprises that enable community to become self-sufficient providing low cost, convenient, dignified and nutritious food in communities at risk of food insecurity and poor diet quality.

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