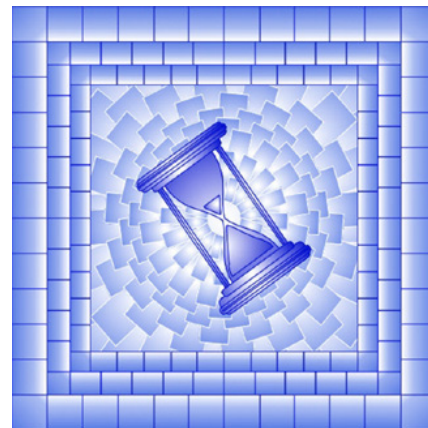


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## Canadian Consumers Prepare for COVID-19



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## Canadian Consumers Prepare for COVID-19

The features of the Canadian consumer environment are shifting rapidly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, shaped by a variety of interconnected and evolving factors. Restrictions on the activities of citizens and businesses and increased pressure on adapting supply chains are influencing the what, where, when and how of Canadian consumption, on an ongoing basis.

As news media provides daily coverage of shortages of non-durable goods across the country, Statistics Canada can help to shed light on the impact of COVID-19 on consumer purchasing patterns.

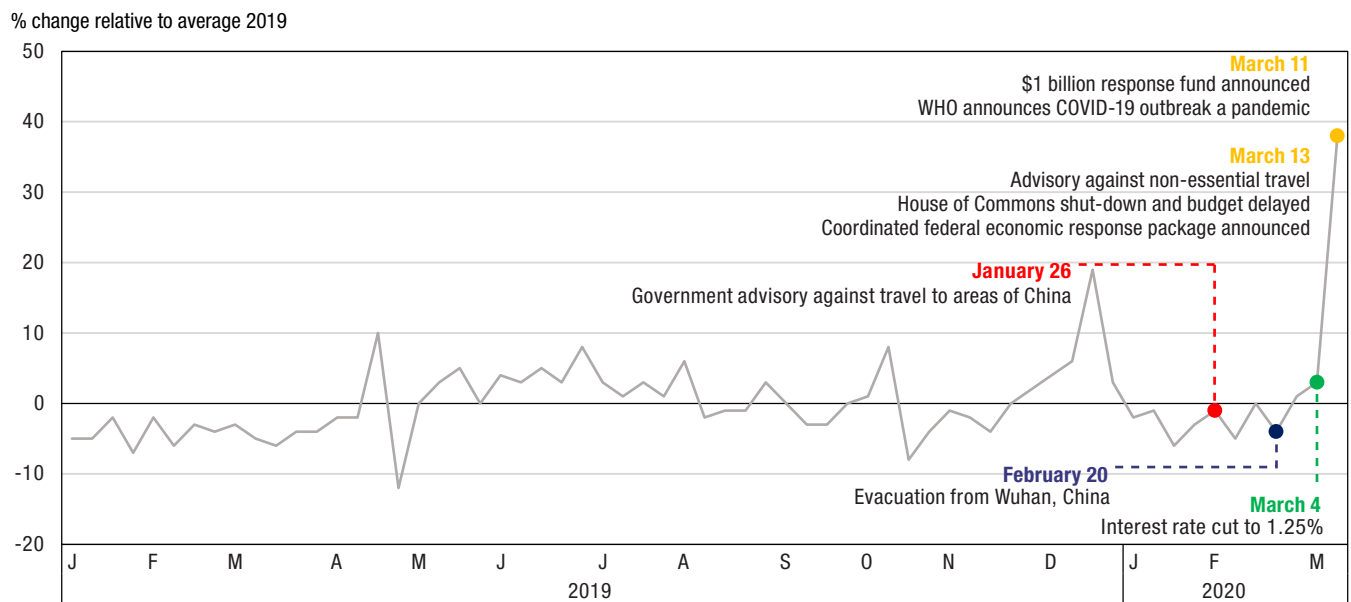
This study aims to analyze trends in consumer demand and sales, as Canadians stock up on grocery items and practice social distancing for an indefinite period. The information is based on transaction data for grocery products.<sup>1</sup>

### Sales increase by 38%

On March 11th, 2020 the federal government announced its COVID-19 response fund followed by a coordinated economic relief package. By the end of that same week, grocery sales had increased 38% compared to their average sales in 2019 (Chart 1). This represents 16% higher revenues than those reported in the week leading up to the December holiday, the busiest shopping week of the year. Compared to the same week in the previous year (52-week % change), sales increased by 46%.

#### Chart 1

##### Weekly percent change in sales for select grocery retailers, relative to average 2019



**Note:** Data are experimental and are subject to revision.

**Source:** Consumer Prices program, special tabulation.

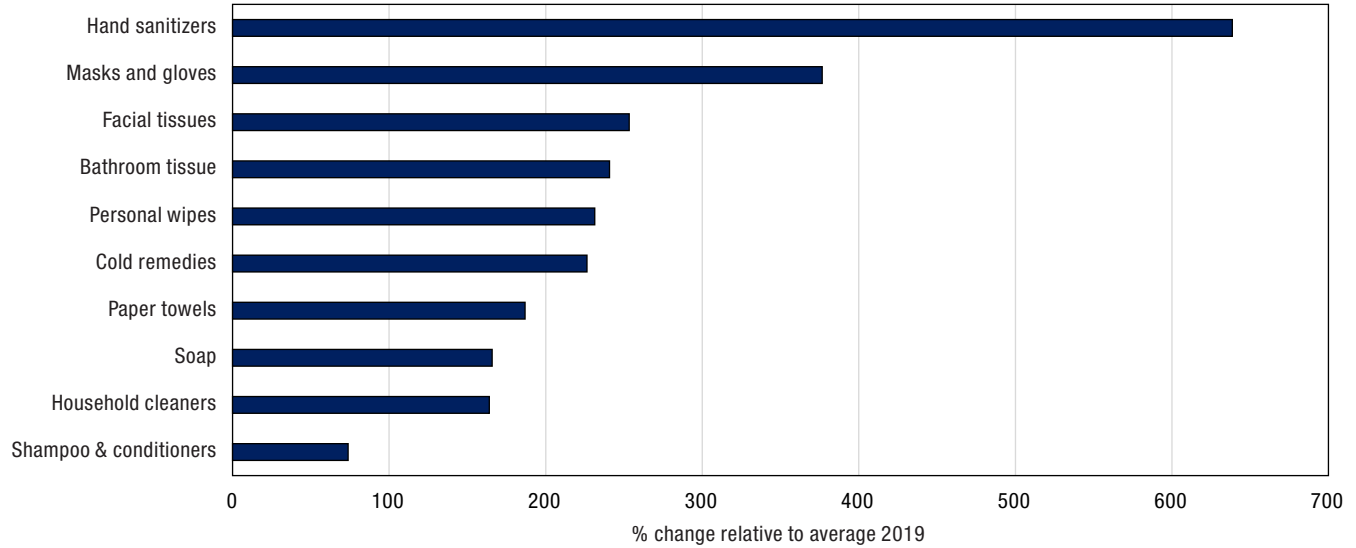
The report highlights percent change compared to the average weekly sales in 2019. Comparisons of weekly sales to the same week in the previous year (52-week % change) are also enlightening, and reveal similar patterns. These are available in the appendix of this study. There are advantages to either approach, but considering there may have been unusual weather events or supply changes in a given week in either year, it was decided to use a yearly average in the comparison to smooth out the impact such events may have made in a short reference period.

1. Transaction data for grocery products are used to calculate a sales index, which is to say, a series of weekly sales divided by the average weekly sales of a reference period. The year-over-year sales relative is also calculated, which compares the sales in each week to the sales of the comparable week in the previous year.

## Personal care and household cleaning products sales surge

**Chart 2**

**Personal care and household cleaning products,<sup>1</sup> percent change in sales for the week ending March 14th relative to average 2019**



<sup>1</sup> Items included in this study are derived from transaction data and are not necessarily priced as part of the Consumer Price Index.

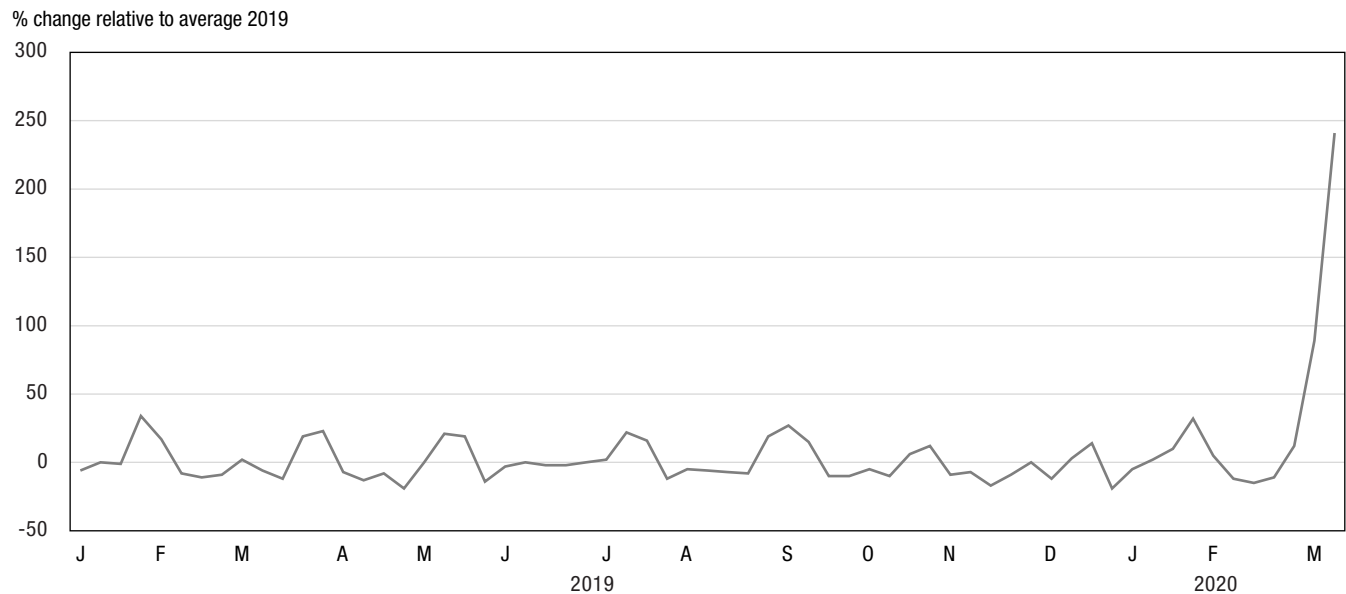
**Note:** Data are experimental and are subject to revision.

**Source:** Consumer Prices program, special tabulation.

Hand sanitizer, and mask and glove sales provided an early indication of shifting consumer behaviour, increasing 477% and 122% respectively as early as the last week of January, and registering 639% and 377% increases respectively in the week ending March 14th compared to the 2019 average (Chart 2).

In contrast, bathroom tissue sales (Chart 3), which received extensive media coverage,<sup>2</sup> only began to rise significantly in the first week of March shortly after Federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu advised Canadians to be prepared with a week's worth of supplies.<sup>3</sup>

**Chart 3**  
**Weekly percent change in bathroom tissue sales, relative to average 2019**



**Note:** Data are experimental and are subject to revision.

**Source:** Consumer Prices program, special tabulation.

Bathroom tissue receipts reached a peak increase of 241% relative to the 2019 average in the week ending March 14th despite reassurances from government, retail industry experts and Canada's largest producer of bathroom tissue<sup>4</sup> that supply is plentiful.

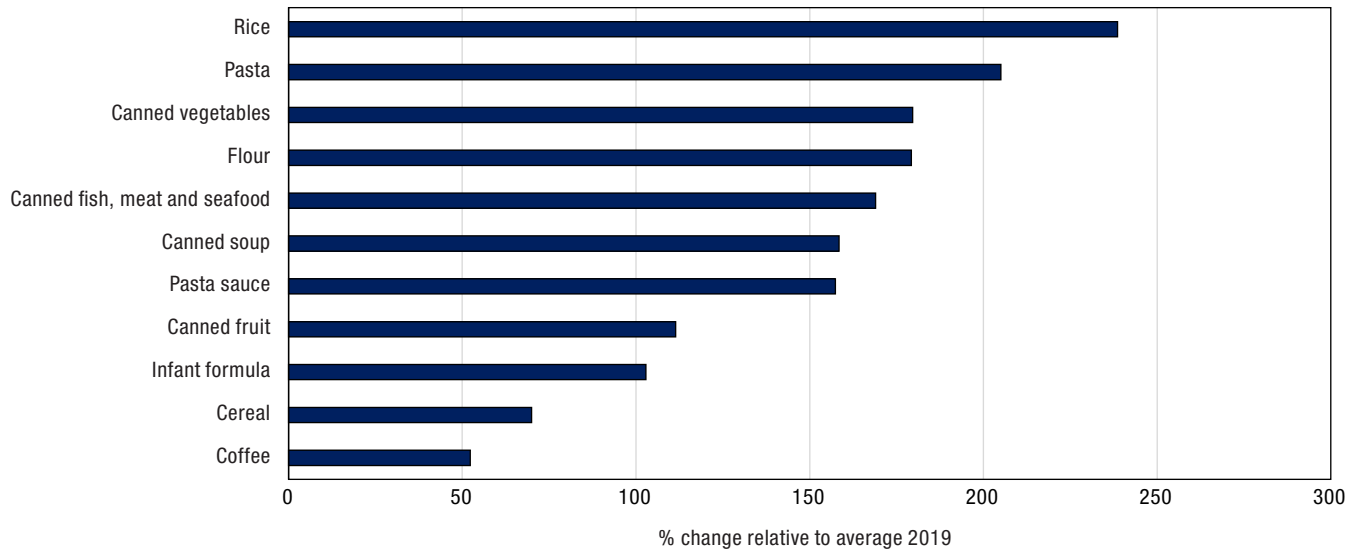
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## Dry goods and shelf-stable foods surpass fresh and frozen foods

Over the past several weeks Canadians have turned to foods they can store, with retailers' revenues for rice increasing more than 239% compared to the 2019 average in the week ending March 14th.

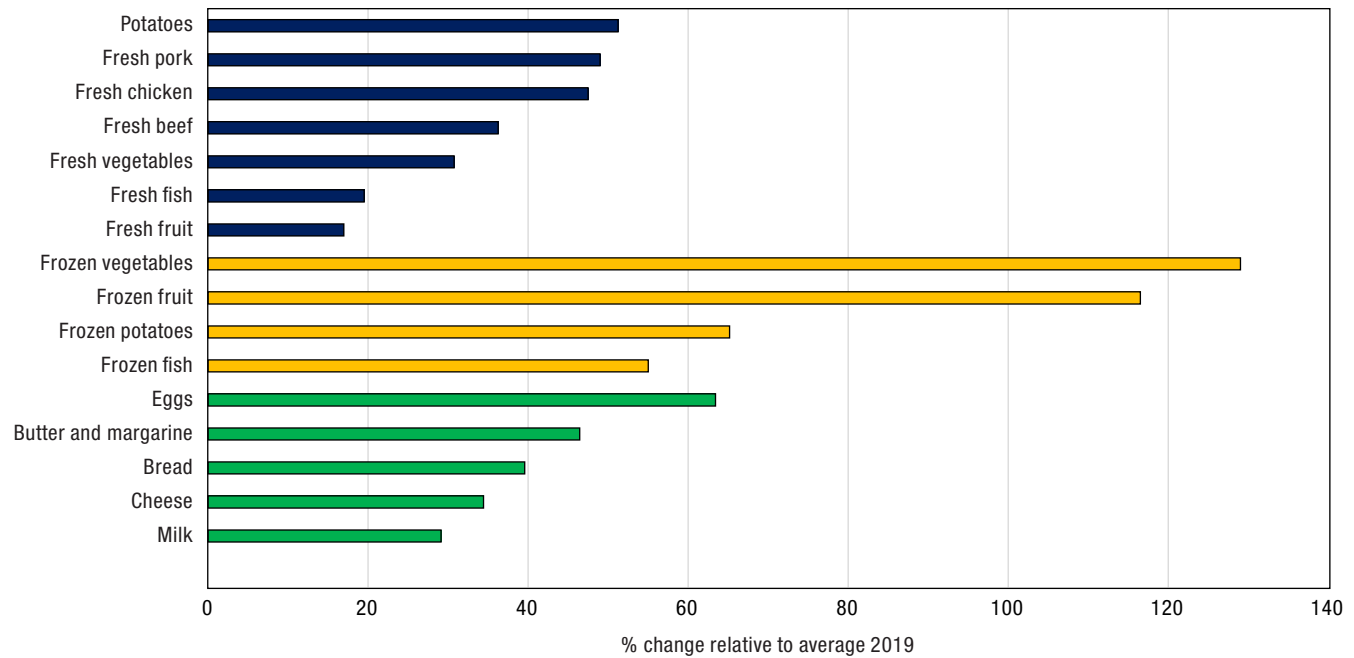
### Chart 4

**Dry goods and shelf-stable foods, percent change in sales for the week ending March 14th relative to average 2019**



**Note:** Data are experimental and are subject to revision.  
**Source:** Consumer Prices program, special tabulation.

Pasta, canned vegetables and flour also featured prominently in Canadian shopping carts alongside canned fish, meat, seafood, soup and pasta sauce (Chart 4). While Canadian staples such as eggs, butter and bread reported increased revenues in the second week of March alongside fresh foods including potatoes and meat, the sales for these perishables increased by a substantially smaller magnitude, suggesting a consumer focus on stockpiling against uncertain conditions (Chart 5).

**Chart 5****Fresh and frozen foods, percent change in sales for the week ending March 14th relative to average 2019**

**Note:** Data are experimental and are subject to revision.

**Source:** Consumer Prices program, special tabulation.

## A work in progress

Over the next few weeks this study will be updated to incorporate more products of interest to the Canadian population.

Although concern has been raised about the possibility of price-gouging with new legislation being passed in Ontario on March 28th,<sup>5</sup> retailers have made promises to Canadian consumers that they will not engage in predatory practices.<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada's ongoing work informing Canadians through data products such as this index and the Consumer Price Index will help give context to uncertain economic times, and enable data users to make informed decisions.

5. Ontario Government. March 28, 2020. [News Release: Ontario Protecting Consumers from Price Gouging.](#)

6. March 3rd 2020 [letter from Galen Weston.](#)

## Appendix

**Table 1**

**Grocery retail sales, select product groups for the week ending March 14th, 2020<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Product group</b>	<b>% change relative to average 2019 sales</b>	<b>52-week % change (same week, previous year)</b>
<b>All products sold at retailers</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>46</b>
Bathroom tissue	241	288
Bread	40	49
Butter and margarine	46	76
Canned fish, meat and seafood	169	199
Canned fruit	111	97
Canned soup	158	151
Canned vegetables	180	165
Cereal	70	75
Cheese	34	44
Coffee	52	57
Cold remedies	226	204
Eggs	63	67
Facial tissues	253	257
Flour	179	208
Fresh beef	36	55
Fresh chicken	47	50
Fresh fish	20	29
Fresh fruit	17	26
Fresh pork	49	61
Fresh vegetables	31	29
Frozen fish	55	51
Frozen fruits	117	94
Frozen potatoes	65	71
Frozen vegetables	129	120
Hand sanitizers	639	735
Household cleaners	164	180
Infant formula	103	121
Masks and gloves	377	404
Milk	29	31
Paper towels	187	227
Pasta	205	193
Pasta sauces	157	135
Personal wipes	231	268
Potatoes	51	59
Rice	239	284
Shampoo and conditioner	74	82
Soap	166	204

1. Data are experimental and are subject to revision.

**Source:** Consumer Prices program, special tabulation.