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Healthy foods not always costliest

(5/18/2012)
By Andy Vance

AMERICANS tend to think that "eating healthy" is expensive, but new research from the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggests that this food price paradigm is based on measuring food prices by calories rather than by portions.

Researchers Andrea Carlson and Elizabeth Frazao at USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) decided to look at price measures other than price per calorie "as a beginning point in answering the question of whether price is a hurdle to making wiser food choices."

Carlson explained that the study calculated food prices for various food groups in three ways: price per calorie, price per edible weight and price per average amount eaten. Price per edible weight is the price of the food after it is cooked and the seeds, peels, skins, shells and bones have been removed. Price per average amount is the price of the average amount consumed by adults who reported their food consumption in a national survey.

Each of more than 4,000 foods in the survey was assigned to: one of the five USDA food groups (grains, dairy, fruit, vegetables or protein foods), to mixed dishes (e.g., spaghetti and tomato sauce) or to the "less healthy" food category.

Carlson said to make it into a healthy food group, a food had to contain specific minimums of at least one of the USDA food groups and had to fall below a maximum amount of saturated fat, added sugars and sodium.

"Less healthy foods" were defined as those high in sodium, added sugars or saturated fats or containing little to no amount of USDA's food groups and included items such as many canned and dry soups, fruit-flavored yogurt and sodas.

"We found that the price measure used has a large effect on which foods are more expensive," Carlson said. "If we use price per calorie, fruits and vegetables tend to be more expensive than less healthy foods. In contrast, if we use price per edible weight or per average amount eaten, then grains, vegetables, fruits and dairy foods are less expensive than most protein foods and less healthy foods" (Figure).

The report indicates that previously held notions about the cost of eating well may be off base.

"This is great news for all those trying to get by with a limited food budget," USDA undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services Kevin Concannon said. "You don't have to compromise on good nutrition just because money is tight. For example, the summer season we're about to enter will bring with it greater availability and volume of higher-quality produce that is better priced than during off-peak times."

While the report concludes overall that eating healthy foods doesn't necessarily mean spending more at the grocery store, the authors did acknowledge some challenges for the average American shopper.

"The price metrics in this analysis are not easily accessible to the consumer at the point of sale," the report explains. "Many grocery stores display price per purchase pound or some other unit price as a service to customers wishing to make price comparisons of similar items that come in a variety of package sizes."

In other words, the best metrics for evaluating the cost of eating well aren't commonly displayed on grocery store shelf tags.

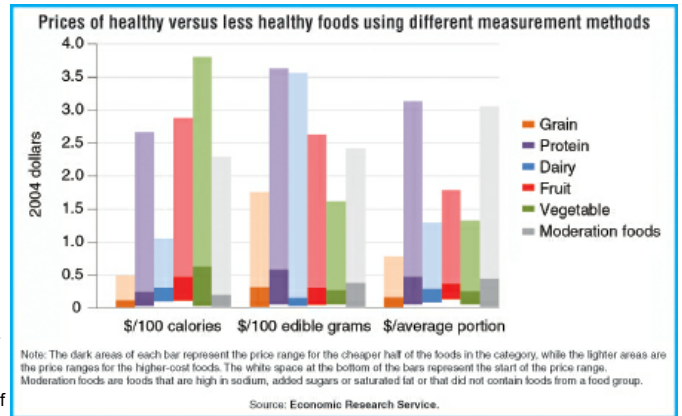
The authors explained that traditional retail pricing metrics are "less effective for nutritional quality price comparisons than the edible weight price between products with differing amounts of waste, such as chicken with and without the skin and bones or between a large watermelon and an apple or between prewashed and chopped winter squash and a whole winter squash."

The implications of consumers more fully understanding the cost of eating healthy foods are important for dealing with the obesity epidemic, according to Robert Post, deputy director of USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy & Promotion.

"We're talking about a very complex situation," Post said. "We're talking about changing a food environment that includes cooking literacy and helping us understand how to cook foods in different ways that are more healthy. I think it also relates to understanding that we need to have more information provided to consumers to help them."

Post said consumer food literacy is an increasingly important issue on a number of fronts.

"We've got to understand that it's beyond literacy," he said. "Even learning how to shop in a supermarket and choose healthier options will be a way to help (consumers), and there are a lot of efforts in our communication program to help them in understanding that, beyond cost, there's an awfully lot of nutritional value that they should be considering, certainly to live healthier lives and on maintaining healthy weight."





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