

# Is health food really more expensive?

Contrary to popular belief, it can actually cost more to eat badly. In fact, a new government report finds that nutritious foods such as grains, vegetables, fruit and dairy typically cost less than items high in saturated fat and added sugars.

Researchers from the USDA compared the prices of 4,439 “healthy” and “less healthy” foods commonly available in supermarkets around the country, examining price of edible weight, price per average portion, and price per calorie.

When price of edible weight or price per portion were used to determine costs, the researchers found healthy foods like toasted oat cereal (a grain), vegetables, fruits, and low-fat milk and plain, low-fat yogurt (dairy) were more affordable than most protein foods (lean roast beef, chicken breast, or canned tuna) and other less healthful ‘moderation foods’ foods that typically pack in an excess amount of saturated fat, added sugar, and/or sodium.

Examples of moderation foods include ice cream sandwiches, low-fat fruit flavored yogurt, and macaroni and cheese. When another measure—price per calorie was used to compare foods, many healthful fruits and vegetables cost more than less healthy ‘moderation foods’—especially those high in saturated fat and/or added sugars (such as chocolate candy, ice cream and tortilla chips). Although previous studies that used price-per-calorie to measure food costs similarly suggested healthy foods were often more expensive than less healthy options, a 2011 study by the USDA that used price of edible weight found that, although whole grains cost more than refined

grains, and fresh and frozen dark green vegetables cost more than starchy vegetables, healthful items such as skim and 1 percent milk were less expensive than whole and two percent milk. Bottled water also tended to be less costly than carbonated nonalcoholic drinks. In the current study, researchers used the USDA’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion Food Prices Database to estimate costs and compare all food items included. Comparing the cost of commonly available foods is important because, at a time when two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese and many low-income families struggle to control their grocery bills, the belief that healthier foods are always pricier adds to the problem. According to The NPDC group, a market research firm, it’s no surprise that Americans come close to following federal dietary guidelines on only seven days per year. Although many variables—personal preferences, convenience, and cultural factors—play a role in what we buy at the supermarket, cost may play an even greater role in our food choices. “It’s a common perception that healthy foods are more expensive than less healthy foods and this perception, real or hypothetical, may prevent many individuals from choosing healthy foods,” says David Katz, MD, Director, Yale University Prevention Research Center.

So what’s a family to do to

consume a more healthful and affordable diet?

Judy Caplan, R.D., a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, suggests the following:

Plan meals ahead of time to cut down on food costs and reduce impulse buying. When you cook, make extra and freeze leftovers in individual portions. That can minimize waste and give you an alternative to grabbing take-out or convenience food.

Since protein foods such as meat and poultry can be expensive, use them more as a condiment than a main course. You can also replace some or all of the meat or poultry used in chilis and stews with beans.

Eat more ‘south of the border’ meals like whole grain tortillas with beans, cheese, and salsa. Choosing healthy fats like avocado (used to make guacamole) can also promote satiety and help you feel full longer. To trim produce costs, buy fruits and vegetables that are in season. You can save even more money if you plant your own backyard garden using seed packets. Plant the five vegetables your family eats most often. Continuous plantings throughout the summer will insure a steady supply. If you don’t have a backyard, container gardening is another option.

—ELISSA DIAZ

