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Tuesday, November 16, 2010

How much does healthy eating cost?

Organic, local, grass-fed... All of that may mean the food is better for you, but it also means it's more expensive. Marketplace's Adriene Hill takes a look at some interesting findings on how much healthy eating costs -- in dollars, well-being and the environment.

TEXT OF STORY

KAI RYSSDAL: We got the government's report on inflation at the wholesale level this morning. There isn't any, is the short headline. The Producer Price index was up a barely noticeable 4 tenths of a percent last month. Prices for pretty much everything were flat or falling in October. Food economists over at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, though, are trying to read the tea leaves for next year. They figure our grocery costs could rise as much as 3 percent in 2011 thanks to crop shortages and higher demand.



A woman shops at a Manhattan grocery store in New York City. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

And the cost of healthy food is growing way faster than food that's perhaps not-so-good for us. From the Marketplace Sustainability desk, Adriene Hill itemizes the recommended daily allowance.

ADRIENE HILL: How much do 2,000 calories cost? Well, it all depends on what you buy. You could eat your Greek yogurt with organic raspberries for breakfast, a turkey avocado wrap for lunch, maybe some wild-caught Alaskan King Salmon, green beans and a whole wheat roll for dinner, then some strawberries drizzled with heavy cream for dessert. All told, it'll set you back \$25.86, give or take. Or, for 2,000 calories, you could buy 10 donuts for about five bucks.

Starches, grains and beans are significantly cheaper than lean meats, seafood, fresh fruits and vegetables for many reasons, including government subsidies and food perishability. And, it turns out, that massive price discrepancy is only one of the very interesting things about the high cost of eating well.

DR. ADAM DREWNOWSKI: What we found was that the obesity rate among Whole Foods shoppers along the order of 4 percent, whereas elsewhere it went up to 35 or 40 percent. That's a 10-fold difference.

Dr. Adam Drewnowski is from the University of Washington in Seattle. He says it's not just your imagination. Those women buying gourmet steel-cut Irish oatmeal do look better in yoga pants than the rest of us.

DREWNOWSKI: Trust me, you knew this ahead of time, didn't you? You suspected this, didn't you?

No, you can't get skinny by shopping at Whole Foods. Expensive chili-infused chocolate is still chocolate. But, [Drewnowski found](#) (PDF) people who care about nutrition are more likely to shop at higher-end grocery stores, where they think they can get more nutritious food. And, people on a budget who shop at lower-price stores can be lured by the junk food they can get for cheap.

Which brings me to really interesting food-related tidbit number two: [A study from the University of Buffalo](#) found that if you lower the cost of healthy food, shoppers use the money they save to buy more chips and cookies.

BRENDA ROCHE: Junk food's convenient, it tastes good. We just have a natural predisposition to like this type of food; we like fats and sweets and sugars.

Brenda Roche is a dietitian for the University of California Cooperative Extension in Los Angeles County. She teaches low-income families to eat better. The Buffalo study found it was easier to change people's eating habits if you instead raise the price of junk food. Roche says raising the price of soda might make people stop and think about how much they're actually spending.

ROCHE: When we talk with youth and we show them when they spend about \$2.50-3.50 a day on soda and snack foods after school, how much that adds up to over time -- over a year, five years, 10 years. It's just mind boggling.

And here's a third, food-related mind boggler for all you enviro-foodies out there. This one a little more focused on the environment than pricing: There's a long-standing debate, hundreds of message back and forth on list-servs and Internet message boards -- no doubt soon to be the subject of a New Yorker cartoon -- about how bad milk is for the environment. To make milk, you've got to have a cow -- feed it, give it lots of water. Cows are needy.

Again, Dr. Adam Drewnowski from the University of Washington.

DREWNOWSKI: When you start looking at carbon dioxide emissions, they're going to be coming from three sources: Production, transportation and packaging.

A carbon footprint analysis Drewnowski looked at found milk near the bottom, and...

DREWNOWSKI: The most sustainable beverage was in fact a carbonated soft drink.

The sugar was local, the tap water was local, the soda was produced locally. But, it just makes no sense, says Drewnowski. If you want to know if a food or drink is worth its carbon, you've got to factor in its nutritional value. If you do that, milk is at the top of the list. Chew on that.

I'm Adriene Hill for Marketplace.

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By James Smith
From Philadelphia, PA, 11/21/2010

What about the other costs associated with eating unhealthy food, specifically costs of Heart Disease, Cancer, and Diabetes.

COMMENTS

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I think when you factor in those other costs, eating healthy foods is less expensive.

By Jo Vaz
11/19/2010

No preservatives, no artificial colors, no enhancers, not cloned, no injected animals, I say it is healthy...who said that natural food needs to be contaminated with all that junk? Cancer patients have risen alot...I wonder why.

Dont tell me that people who eat Healthy eat less and thats why they are thin, thats a lie. People who eat healthy want to stay away from all the junk that is NOT supposed to be in our food.

By Angela Errera
From Philadelphia, PA, 11/18/2010

I agree whole-heartedly with Kim Johnson.

By Tyler Major
From Bellingham, WA, 11/18/2010

Thank you Kim from Baltimore! Great insight.

By Cat Master
From TX, 11/18/2010

People who shop at Whole Foods are leaner because food is so expensive there that they have to buy less food.

By Jared Van Leeuwen
From Kirkland, WA, 11/18/2010

The government should find all of the subsidies which benefit junk food and repeal those subsidies.

By Kim Johnson
From Baltimore, MD, 11/17/2010

I was genuinely horrified listening to this broadcast, which essentially demonized some of the cheapest and most nutritious foods humans can eat. Instead of comparing Whole Foods' high-cost products to doughnuts -- as though that's the only choice that consumers have -- you should have been comparing them to cheaper and often nutritionally superior foods like the "starches, grains and beans" that you so vilify.

Healthy eating does not equal low-carb, which is essentially the thrust of the diet "advice" you were offering. And even the nutritionist who weighed in said nothing about cheap, healthy foods; she spoke only about people choosing junk food over healthy food.

People who are poor can eat as healthfully as Whole Foods shoppers -- or even more so, given all the calorie- and fat-loaded prepared foods available there. How? (And this is the question you should have addressed.) Very simple. Listen up.

Beans and whole grains are some of the most nutritious foods in existence. As any strict vegetarian can tell you, a diet composed of bean products (including soy) and whole grains (rice, wheat, corn, etc.) along with generous portions of vegetables and fruits and sparing use of fats and oils offers complete, balanced nutrition for humans of any age. Also, these foods are easy to cook and offer infinite variety -- all kinds of combos are possible.

And what is the cost of such a diet? Well, think about what the dried beans and split peas cost in your supermarket. Next to nothing, right? So buy lots of them, and pick up canned beans when they're on sale. Then add in some bags of rice and other grains, some boxes of pasta, and some canned tomato products (house brands are just as good as the name brands). Then, add some large bags of frozen vegetables -- not the ones with sauce, though. Round it out with some fresh fruit -- apples are generally cheap and are available year round. Now you've got a grocery cart full of staples that will provide a week's nutritious meals; you just increase or decrease quantities based on the size of your family.

This is the cheapest kind of eating there is and, amazingly, the most healthful. And it doesn't have to be inconvenient either. Peanut butter sandwiches on whole grain bread still make great school lunches; add a few carrot sticks (cut up at home) and an apple, and your kids will be appropriately stoked for the afternoon's academic endeavors. Even a healthy breakfast can be cheap. Oatmeal (the plain old-fashioned kind) with chopped banana is an inexpensive breakfast cereal. Boxed cereals can be expensive, but if you buy the non-sugared variety, watch for sales, or purchase at low-price stores like Trader Joe's or bulk stores like Costco, these become an affordable option.

Finally, a special word about frozen vegetables. They are not to be sneered at as nutritionally lacking. In fact, it's long been conceded that frozen veggies are usually more nutritional than fresh because they are frozen immediately after picking, which retains nutrients lost during processing, packaging, and shipping of fresh veggies.

A big bag of frozen broccoli is also much more economical than fresh, since you are buying in quantity and only using what you need, thus eliminating the waste that often results with fresh.

One caveat, here. Canned veggies do not have the same nutritional qualities as frozen or fresh. They are overcooked and excessively salted in processing, which leaches out most of the vitamins. Avoid them, with the exception of tomato products and beans.

I hope that, in the near future, we will hear a story on Marketplace about how real nutrition is affordable to everyone.

By Jessica Rider
From Berkeley, CA, 11/17/2010

Noting that Whole Foods shoppers are thinner than average is really an utter non-sequitur when it comes to assessing the cost of a healthy diet. All it tells us is that thin people with above average incomes like to shop at Whole Foods (they probably like to shop at Neiman Marcus, too, but that doesn't have to do with anything either).

Moreover, as others have noted, the set up comparing \$5 worth of donuts to \$25 worth of healthy food is also irrelevant. If people were really trying to satisfy their minimum caloric requirements as cheaply as possible, they'd stop at 2000 calories and there would be no correlation between poverty and obesity. But in the US, we're (mostly) not dealing with a population trying to figure out how to get a minimally adequate diet (which you could probably do with beans, rice and oil for less than \$5/day, by the way). Second, the person choosing the donuts and the person choosing wild salmon and veggies are different people. If Mr. Wild Salmon loses his job, he isn't likely to suddenly switch to an exclusively donut diet-- he'll probably switch to tilapia and frozen veg, which, I might add, are not necessarily less nutritious than his previous diet.

There are serious questions to be asked in this arena; in my own PhD research, I'm focusing on how income shocks affect grocery purchasing patterns. There are other researchers working on sussing out the determinants of food demand, how the convenience and time costs associated with food preparation influence choices and whether junk food taxes would have a large impact on demand (most rigorous studies say that unless such taxes are astronomically high they'll have little impact). But most of the good work going on in this area is a little more nuanced than, 'Whole Foods shoppers look hotter than you in yoga pants' and intimations that poor people might as well give up on eating healthy.

Please Marketplace, you usually highlight good research through quality reporting. You whiffed this one-- try again.

By Jennifer Graham-Rateliff
From KS, 11/17/2010

I so agree with @ Sheila and @ Laura. My mother taught me to shop the "grocery store perimeter" where you find real food...that you have to cook! That's where the real savings lie. The problem is not that healthy food is too expensive, it's that so many people have no idea how to cook healthy, good-tasting food; or they think it takes too much time. So they exist on all the pre-packaged additive-infested junk out there that is marketed as "food" because it's easy. Marketers know that they can always count on the "lazy gene" to sell something. And think how much money could be saved in food stamps if we gave cooking lessons instead!

By Alberto Hauffen
From Riverside, CA, 11/17/2010

For the record,
Brenda Roche is listed as a "Nutrition, Family & Consumer Sciences Advisor" with Cooperative Extension, University of California. She works out of the Los Angeles County CE office.

By R G
From Rockville, MD, 11/17/2010

I wanted to disagree with the previous commenters to say that this article is great. Yes, if I shop at WF, I buy smaller quantities of whatever healthy stuff is on sale. I am far less likely to be tempted by the junk because it's expensive. When I shop at -mid-level grocery store- I'm more tempted by the deals on chips, desserts, cheese.

By Martin Dutcher
11/17/2010

It does seem that whenever the American public begins to think - about health, finances, environment, education - and then act by starting to changing their buying habits, out come misleading articles, scare tactics, and misinformation (more frequently, incomplete information), that maintain the status quo. I think most writers and reporters are doing this inadvertently, being "fed" the information from academics whose programs are funded by large pharmaceutical companies, agri-business, insurance companies, etc. This article was a good example, as previous comments confirm. What's missing from the critique (but is known by marketing experts) is that our current choices/habits get passed on to our children as habits and addictions (sugar being only the most obvious) - excellent marketing plan!

By sarah delevan
From LA, CA, 11/17/2010

I feel bad saying this but I believe that this article does a disservice to any reader who doesn't already know better. My husband and I eat a fully organic diet, including meats on a budget of \$40 a week or less.

The donut comparison... Seriously? You made yourself look silly. It is unfortunate that this type of article is repeatedly seen in the media rather than stories of success in eating well at reasonable prices. www.eatityoullikeit.com is a new resource site and it shows weekly how this can be done.

By Laura Foley
From MO, 11/17/2010

I agree with @Sheila—you would do your listeners a service by following up with a story on how to eat nutritiously on a limited budget. Stories like this are likely to make some folks on lean budgets throw up their hands in despair and turn back to the chips.

I don't have the kind of food budget that allows me to shop at Whole Foods (my town doesn't even have one), but I eat a nutritious diet. I have to be finicky

about why I buy organic, but our fridge, freezer, and pantry shelves are stocked with fruits, vegetables, beans, 1% milk, reduced-fat cheeses, yogurt, oatmeal, popcorn (counts as a whole grain, and is low in calories and high in fiber when prepared with just a little oil), and lean meats (including venison!). I comparison shop, use coupons when helpful (most are for processed foods that I don't eat), stock up on sale items, and eat produce seasonally. (Hint: Frozen produce is at least as nutritious as fresh, as it's flash-frozen right after picking, which preserves the nutrients.) I think this time of year it gets a little easier to plan cheap, nutritious meals, as bean-based soups and stews are delicious, filling, healthful, and cheap!

By Stephanie Meyer
From Minneapolis, MN, 11/17/2010

You must have assumed a person would eat entire multi-serving containers of those foods to arrive at \$25.86! I shop at Whole Foods, eat Greek yogurt, wild-caught salmon, turkey, and avocados every week, and very carefully watch what I spend. I feed 3 people - not 1 - on \$25.00 worth of those foods! Not to mention, the price per pound of the real food would be a fraction of the price of the donuts.

By Donna Feldman
From Louisville, CO, 11/16/2010

Yes the cost of unhealthy choices is backloaded but who cares? No one pays a higher insurance premium for being chronically unhealthy. No one pays to cost of their diabetes/hypertension/heart disease/arthritis/breast cancer/kidney disease/colon cancer/metabolic syndrome/etc. It's all masked by "free" medical care. So trying to make the argument that we should eat healthy because it's cheaper in the long run is laughable. No one cares because the costs of all that medical care are completely hidden. So of course people will use the money they saved on junk food. Why should they care? Personal responsibility is non-existent in this country.

By Janine Perlman
11/16/2010

As a nutritional biochemist, I'm sorry the conclusions of this story weren't more fully explored, because, as presented, they're flawed at best. Like other mammals, humans did not evolve to drink milk past weaning; only a recent mutation has allowed a minority of people to consume dairy without becoming ill. The most respected human nutrition researchers (e.g., Harvard's Walter Willett) are finding that dairy foods are actually antithetical to good health; consumption is correlated with osteoporosis (rather than with strong bones) and also with prostate cancer (e.g., <http://www.cancer.gov/aboutnci/ncicancerbulletin/archive/2007/022707/page5>). Children and adults would be much better off drinking that lowest-possible-carbon-footprint beverage: Tap Water!!!

By Sheila Hellman
From Jonesboro, AR, 11/16/2010

What many people overlook, and your story did not clearly mention, is that the real cost of healthy eating (or not) is back loaded, i.e. the true cost is paid later in life when the body reaps the benefits of healthy eating and remains strong, or when the body deteriorates early due to lack of excellent nutrition and the consequences of a life of eating highly processed foods. The early deterioration costs ALL of us big bucks when we have to fund costly treatment for the unhealthy body that results from poor food choices, and dole out all these federal disability checks.

Also, I am distressed that you seem to perpetuate the myth that healthy eating is expensive. Healthy FANCY eating is expensive, but I can show you some excellent strategies and selections for healthy eating for FAR less money than indicated in your story. Please consider this for a future story. Thank you.

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