How Much Do Americans Pay for Fruits and Vegetables?

Introduction

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Despite the increasing knowledge about the health benefits of diets high in fruits and vegetables, data from the U.S. food supply show that, in 2000, Americans consumed only half as much fruit as recommended by the *Food Guide Pyramid* (FGP) for a 2,200-calorie diet. Vegetable consumption was close to recommendations, although French fries, potato chips, and iceberg lettuce—vegetable forms that are either high in fat or low in nutrients—constituted a third of total daily vegetable servings (Putnam et al., 2000).

The gap between the recommended amounts and the actual consumption of fruits and vegetables cannot be entirely attributed to consumer ignorance of the health benefits associated with their consumption. According to a survey by the Food Marketing Institute, among the nearly 70 percent of shoppers who believe their diet could be at least "somewhat" or "a lot healthier," the most common response among all shoppers on how to improve the healthfulness of their diets was eating more fruits and vegetables (68 percent). This was three times as many people as those responding they would eat less fats and oils (22 percent) or less red meat (22 percent), less junk food (18 percent), or less sugar (17 percent) (Food Marketing Institute, 2000).

Nonetheless, consumers seem to find it difficult to eat more fruits and vegetables. Some also believe they are too expensive (Kurtzweil, 1997) or too expensive to serve every day, especially when purchased fresh (Raynor et al., 2002).

One of the problems consumers face is that few know what constitutes a FGP serving of fruits and vegetables (Hogbin and Hess, 1999). Many are confused because the serving size on the nutrition label often differs from the FGP serving size and both probably differ from the amount consumers typically consume. Consumers are therefore unable to accurately assess the cost of eating a FGP serving of fruits and vegetables and may erroneously believe that cost is a barrier. For example, they may balk at the idea of paying 97 cents for a pound of peaches, not realizing that they will be getting 4 FGP servings (½ cup) in a pound, which translates to 21 cents per serving. Consumers may cite cost as a barrier, when other factors such as taste, preferences, and availability may be more important (Shankar and Klassen, 2001). For example, Stewart et al. (2003) found that a marginal increase in income was not likely to induce low-income households (below 130 percent of the poverty line) to spend more on fruits and vegetables, possibly because they have higher priority needs or wants.

So, how expensive are fruits and vegetables? And do fresh fruits and vegetables really cost more than processed, as is widely believed? If so, does this hold for all fruits and vegetables, or only for some?

The purpose of this report then is twofold: to examine the purchase and serving prices of fresh and processed fruits and vegetables, and to calculate the cost of meeting fruit and vegetable recommendations in terms of the FGP.