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SNAP Benefits and Eating Out: Wise Choices Required

Each month, USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) provides 35 million low-income people with benefits to purchase approved foods at authorized foodstores. SNAP benefit levels are based on USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)—comprised of low-cost foods that meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and deviate as little as possible from the consumption patterns of the low-income population.

A major restriction of the TFP is that it does not include foods purchased at fast food, takeout, or sitdown restaurants. A typical low-income household spent about 27 percent of its food budget on away-from-home foods in 2002. Like upper income households, who spend almost half of their food budget on food away from home, many low-income households turn to restaurant meals in part to help save time. Previous ERS research has shown that many away-from-home foods are high in total and saturated fats and low in dietary fiber, calcium, and iron. However, healthy food choices, such as low-fat milk, apple slices, and some salads, are increasingly available in away-from-home eating places.

Using 2001-02 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data, researchers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and USDA examined the effect on diet quality and costs of including food-away-from-home options in the TFP. When healthy eating-out choices were incorporated into a hypothetical food plan that allows at-home and away-from-home foods, the result was a diet that met the *Dietary Guidelines*. The estimated cost of the hypothetical TFP, however, was higher. At 2001-02 prices, eating one meal per week away from home would increase the cost of the TFP by 7 percent.

Allowing SNAP participants to use their benefits to purchase food away from

home is not likely to result in the healthy food choices found by the researchers' model. Most U.S. households make poorer nutritional choices than those recommended by the TFP and the *Dietary Guidelines*. Allowing for SNAP benefits to be spent on food away from home, which is generally nutritionally inferior to food at home, may help SNAP participants balance time constraints and other needs, but could also make eating healthy even more challenging. \mathbb{W}

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This finding is drawn from ...

"Food Consumed Away from Home Can Be a Part of a Healthy and Affordable Diet," by Wen You, Ge Zhang, Brenda M. Davy, Andrea Carlson, and Biing-Hwan Lin, in *The Journal of Nutrition*, October 2009, Vol. 139, pp. 1994-99.



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