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Finding: Food Choices & Health

September 20, 2012



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Healthy Foods Not Necessarily More Expensive Than Less Healthy Foods

by Andrea Carlson and Elizabeth Frazao



Healthy foods are commonly perceived to be more expensive than less healthy foods, a belief perhaps fueled by studies showing that healthy foods are more expensive per calorie. This is not surprising, as less-healthy foods tend to be higher in calories than healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, and the price-per-calorie metric does not account for total calories consumed. For example, both whole and skim milk cost about the same at the store, but because a gallon of whole milk has nearly double the calories of a gallon of skim, whole milk costs nearly half as much, per calorie, as skim milk. Does this indicate whole milk is "cheaper" than skim?

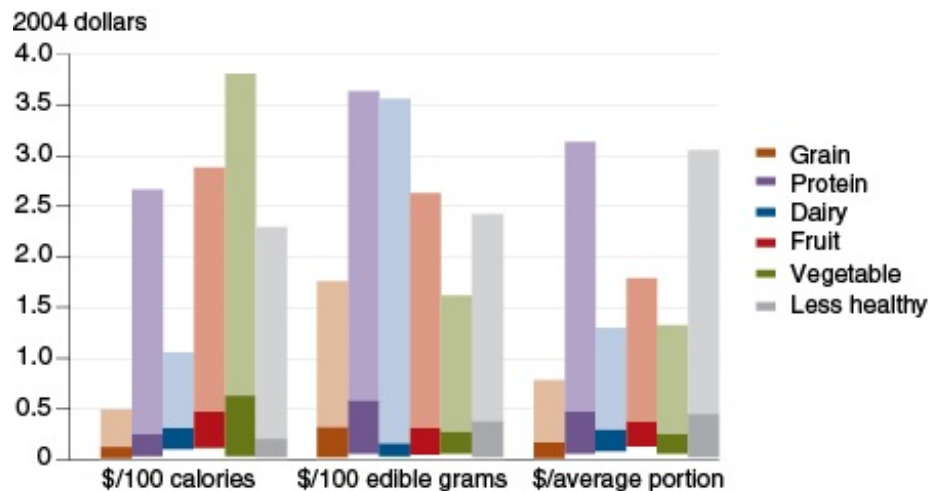
ERS researchers measured the prices of over 4,000 foods using three price metrics: price per 100 calories, price per 100 edible grams, and price per average portion. Price per edible gram is the price of a food after it has been cooked and the seeds, peels, skins, shells, and bones have been removed. Price per average portion is the price of the average amount consumed by adults who reported consuming the food in a national survey.

Each of the 4,000 foods was assigned to one of the food groups found at ChooseMyPlate.gov (grains, dairy, fruits, vegetables, or protein foods) or to the "less healthy" food category. Less healthy foods were defined as those high in sodium, added sugars, or saturated fats, or that contain small to zero amounts of the food groups. Foods in this category included many canned and dry soups, fruit-flavored yogurt, and sodas.

Prices for each food category varied depending on the price metric used. Based on the price-per-calorie measure, some vegetables are considerably more expensive than less healthy foods. In contrast, the price-per-edible-gram measure shows that many fruits and most vegetables cost no more than many less healthy foods: vegetable prices ranged from \$0.06 to \$1.55 per 100 edible grams, with half costing less than \$0.28. And less healthy foods cost between \$0.03 and \$2.40 per 100 edible grams, with half costing less than \$0.39.

Both fruits and vegetables are also priced lower than less healthy foods when measured by price per average portion. Fruit prices ranged from \$0.13 to \$1.65 per average portion and vegetables from \$0.06 to \$1.27; less healthy foods ranged from \$0.02 to \$3.04. Using this metric, the less healthy foods are more expensive than all of the food groups except the protein group.

Measured in dollars per 100 edible grams or per average portion consumed, many fruits and vegetables are cheaper than “less healthy” foods



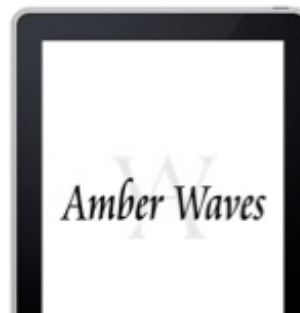
Notes: The dark areas of each bar represent the price range for the cheaper half of the foods in the category, while the lighter areas are the price ranges for the higher cost foods. White space at the bottom of the bars represents the start of the price range.

Less healthy foods are foods that are high in sodium, added sugars, or saturated fat, or that contain small to zero amounts of foods from a food group.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

This article is drawn from...

Are Healthy Foods Really More Expensive? It Depends on How You Measure the Price, by Andrea Carlson and Elizabeth Frazao, USDA, Economic Research Service, May 2012





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