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The High Costs of Poor Eating Patterns

In the United States, high intakes of fat and saturated fat, and low intakes of calcium and fiber-containing foods such as whole grains, vegetables, and fruits, are associated with several chronic health conditions. In particular, scientists suggest that improved diets could prevent a significant proportion of heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis-related hip fractures, and neural-tube birth defects. A 1993 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* estimated that 14 percent of all deaths in the United States could be attributed to poor diets and/or sedentary lifestyles.

Both the aging of the U.S. population and the increasing number of Americans who are overweight are anticipated to increase the prevalence of coronary heart disease, some types of cancer, stroke, and diabetes—with adverse consequences for health-care expenditures and quality of life.

The costs associated with these health conditions are substantial. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) estimated that \$71 billion in medical costs, lost productivity resulting from disability, and premature deaths in 1995 could be attributed to diet-related coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes. Medical costs at \$34 billion accounted for nearly half of that total, followed by premature deaths and lost productivity resulting from disability.

The ERS study notes that the estimated \$71 billion in costs attributed to diets underestimate the true costs associated with unhealthy diets. For example, the study did not include diet-related costs associated with osteoporosis, hypertension, and obesity. In addition, the study used very conservative estimates to value premature deaths.

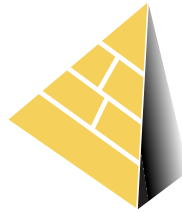
Despite efforts by public and private agencies to educate consumers about how to achieve healthier diets, Americans are far from meeting these recommendations. Research by USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion indicates that in 1994-96, only about 12 percent of Americans 2 years and older had diets that met at least 8 of 10 nutritional recommendations from the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the Food Guide Pyramid.

How to motivate consumers to improve their diets? As the articles in this issue of *FoodReview* illustrate, food choices involve a complex process in which nutrition knowledge competes with myriad other factors, such as income, tastes, habits, attitudes, prices, convenience, and advertising. The prevalence of dining out presents special concerns, as away-from-home foods are generally higher in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, and lower in fiber and calcium. Also, consumers appear to be less nutritionally vigilant in their food choices when eating out.

Although researchers have long known that it is difficult to get people to change their food consumption patterns, research now makes clear that the costs associated with not changing current food consumption patterns are substantial.

Elizabeth Frazão
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