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How Much Do Americans Pay for Fruits and Vegetables?

Jane Reed, Elizabeth Frazão, and Rachel Itskowitz

Abstract

Americans do not consume recommended levels of fruits and vegetables. One argument is that they are expensive, especially when purchased fresh. This analysis uses ACNielsen Homescan data on 1999 household food purchases from all types of retail outlets to estimate an annual retail price per pound for 69 forms of fruits and 85 forms of vegetables. Since many fruits and vegetables contain much that is nonedible in the purchase weight, cost per pound might not be a good indicator of cost per amount consumed. Therefore, this analysis also estimated the number of servings per pound of purchased item after excluding all parts of the fruits and vegetables not usually eaten. According to this formula, consumers can meet the recommendations of three servings of fruits and four servings of vegetables daily for 64 cents. Since this represents only 12 percent of daily food expenditures per person in 1999, consumers still have 88 percent of their food dollar left to purchase the other three food groups. (Even low-income households have 84 percent of their food dollar left.) Although cost differences among fresh and processed forms were generally small, our study also found that after adjusting for waste and serving size, 63 percent of fruits and 57 percent of vegetables were cheapest in their fresh form.

Keywords: Fruits, vegetables, fresh, processed, retail price, serving.

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Executive Summary

Americans consume only half as much fruit as recommended. Vegetable consumption, although close to recommendations, has a third of total servings coming from French fries, potato chips, and iceberg lettuce. One argument for not consuming more fruits and vegetables is that they are expensive, especially when purchased fresh. But how expensive are fruits and vegetables? Do fresh fruits and vegetables really cost more than their processed counterparts? And if so, does it hold for all fruits and vegetables, or only for some?

This analysis uses ACNielsen Homescan data on 1999 household food purchases from all types of retail outlets to estimate an annual retail price per pound for 69 forms of fruits and 85 forms of vegetables. Since many fruits and vegetables contain much that is nonedible in the purchase weight, cost per pound might not be a good indicator of cost per amount consumed. This analysis also estimated the number of servings per pound of purchased item after excluding all parts of the fruits and vegetables not usually eaten. Our analysis also examined the costs of fruits and vegetables needed to meet the dietary recommendations. Among the 154 forms of fruits and vegetables we priced, more than half were estimated to cost 25 cents or less per serving. Consumers can meet the recommendations of three servings of fruits and four servings of vegetables daily for 64 cents. Since this represented only 12 percent of daily food expenditures per person in 1999, consumers still had 88 percent of their food dollar left to purchase the other three food groups. Even low-income households still had 84 percent left.

The study also found that after adjusting for waste and serving size, 63 percent of fruits and 57 percent of vegetables were least expensive in their fresh form. Even though fresh fruits and vegetables may be less expensive to eat than processed, for many fruits and vegetables the difference in price per serving between the least and most expensive versions was often less than 25 cents. For some, this price difference may be a small price to pay for the conveniences—such as longer shelf life, ease of preparation, and greater availability—associated with processed forms.