

## **Eating Healthy on a Budget**

### **The Consumer Economics Perspective**

#### ***Can people eat healthier and spend less money?***

- USDA issues four Food Plans (Thrifty, Low-Cost, Moderate-Cost, and Liberal) that show people how to eat a healthy diet at various cost levels. By following USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan, a family can eat a healthier diet, including more vegetables and fruits, at less than what they are spending on food.
- The average American family of four (married couple with two children) spent approximately \$185 per week on food (away and at home) in 2009. This spending does not buy a nutritious diet. The most recent results of USDA's Healthy Eating Index, a report card on the American diet, shows most people have a diet that needs improvement (average Index score is 58 out of 100). Average intake of vegetables is 1.47 cups per day (about 59 percent of the recommendation) and average intake of fruits is .84 cups per day (about 42 percent of the recommendation).
- By following USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan, people could save money and consume a healthier diet. The Low-Cost Food Plan is a nutritious diet that in November 2010 cost \$175 per week for a family of four (married couple age 20-50 and two children age 6-8 and 9-11). Of this total amount, 40 percent goes to vegetables and fruits. Unlike the typical diet, the Plan meets USDA Food Pattern recommendations for vegetables and fruits. For the family of four, the range per person is 2 - 3.5 cups of vegetables per day and 1.5 - 2.5 cups of fruits. Contrary to popular opinion that a healthier diet costs more, it is possible for people to eat healthier, including more vegetables and fruits, and spend less on food.
- USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan not only contains more vegetables and fruits than what people are presently eating, it contains more whole grains and lower fat/skim milk products than what people are eating. It contains much less fats, oils, and sweets than what people are eating.
- USDA maintains a recipe finder database (see <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/USDAFoodPlansCostofFood.htm>) that contains low-cost food choices that follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and are relatively easy to prepare. Food choices or recipes are organized by menu item (e.g., main dish, side dish, soup) and intended audience (e.g., older adults, Hispanics, parents of young children).

### ***Are fruits and vegetables so expensive that people cannot afford to eat a healthy diet?***

- A recent Produce Marketing Association report “The Cost of the Recommended Daily Servings of Fresh Produce” shows people can meet vegetable and fruit recommendations for about \$0.50 per cup. The average price per cup equivalent across all fresh produce is \$0.42 for vegetables and \$0.56 for fruits (based on 2009-10 data). Nationally, the average retail price for fresh vegetables and fruits recommended for a 2000 calorie diet (4.5 cup equivalents) is \$2.18.
- In the total U.S., the least expensive fresh vegetables were potatoes, lettuce, eggplant, prepared cooking greens, summer squash, carrots, and tomatillos (options costing less than \$0.42 per cup equivalent).
- In the total U.S., the least expensive fresh fruits were watermelon, bananas, apples, pears pineapple, and peaches (options costing less than \$0.56 per cup equivalent).
- Opting for the least expensive choices available in a single store can significantly drop the average price of fresh vegetables and fruits. According to a USDA study, opting for frozen or canned vegetables and fruits may also lower costs.

### ***How can people actually know what foods are healthful choices and that they are likely economical as well?***

- To help consumers implement the 2010 Dietary Guidelines, USDA introduced a 7-day menu as a motivational tool that can help them put a healthy eating pattern into practice.
- Averaged over a week, this menu identifies foods that provide the recommended amounts of key nutrients. Based on national average food costs, adjusted to 2011 prices, the cost of this menu is less than the average amount spent for food, per person, for a 4-person family. For a 2,000 calories menu, the average food cost is \$6.65 per day per person.

