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**Economics Editor:**

Rosanna Mentzer Morrison  
(202) 219-0858

**Managing Editor:**

Mary E. Maher  
(202) 219-0031

**Art Director:**

Susan DeGeorge

**Editorial/Graphic Assistance:**

Cynthia Ray

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## Moving Toward Healthier Diets

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the public leader in providing research and information to promote healthy eating. These activities range from the popular Food Guide Pyramid's education and promotion to research on nutrient intake and absorption. USDA's message is clear and simple: better food choices and diets translate into a healthier America. Although consumption patterns are changing slowly, many Americans—including children—are not meeting dietary recommendations. For example, people eat only about half the recommended amount of fruits, and some children continue to have low calcium and iron intakes. Unfortunately, many people find that adopting and sustaining new eating habits is difficult, even with proper nutrition knowledge.

While many factors—such as stress levels, genetic predisposition, physical activity, and smoking—influence someone's risk of chronic disease, diet is certainly an important factor. In fact, 4 of the top 10 causes of death in the United States—heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes—are associated with diets that are too high in calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol or too low in dietary fiber. Diet-related health conditions cost society an estimated \$250 billion annually in medical costs and lost productivity.

This issue of *FoodReview* looks at America's diet and what this means for diet quality, nutrition, and health. The role of nutritionists, health care professionals, and dietitians in this dynamic arena is clear, but what about the economist? The most obvious role is one of that profession's mainstays: estimating costs and benefits. In the nutrition area, this translates into estimating the costs of medical care and lost productivity that diet-related diseases impose on society, and, likewise, the benefits of increased intake of certain nutrients, such as calcium, in helping to prevent diseases, such as osteoporosis. Balancing costs and benefits helps ensure efficient use of resources in Government activities, such as nutrition education programs.

Another role of economists in the nutrition area is understanding who is eating what, how much, when, where, and why. Understanding how prices, income, and socioeconomic characteristics shape food choices underpins much of this research.

Several critical issues of this type of food demand analysis remain unexamined and are the subject of speculation. In particular, everyone suspected that nutrition knowledge, attitudes, and awareness of diet-disease relationships were part of the mosaic of factors determining food choices, but empirical evidence has been limited. That changed in 1989 with the advent of a series of USDA surveys of food intake that were coupled with followup surveys of respondent's nutrition knowledge, attitudes, and awareness. For the first time, economists could link together factors traditionally thought to influence demand, such as prices and income, with other factors, such as nutrition knowledge.

The new surveys open the door for economists to collaborate with nutritionists and other scientists to examine the complex determinants of food choices and the implications for diet quality and health-care costs. Ultimately these partnerships will yield substantial societal benefits, as program designers and administrators use research results to improve nutrition education efforts and food-assistance programs.

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