



ERS *Report Summary*

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Assessing the Healthfulness of Consumers' Grocery Purchases

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What Is the Issue?

Nutritionists, healthcare providers, and policymakers seek solutions to the ongoing proliferation of obesity, overweight, and other health-related concerns that can be linked, in part, to diet quality. Some recent studies have illustrated the deleterious effects of food away from home (FAFH) on Americans' diets, but food choices made by consumers when grocery shopping may also affect diet quality. This report measures the extent to which U.S. consumers are adhering to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGA) with their food-at-home (FAH) purchases and the role of selected demographic and market factors on food purchase healthfulness.

What Did the Study Find?

Overall, Americans have a long way to go in conforming to dietary guidelines with their FAH purchases. Very few households meet the guidelines when food shopping.

- Consumers purchase too few fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and too many refined grains, fats, and added sugars.
- The average 2005 Healthy Eating Index score for food-at-home purchases was 56.4, far below the maximum score of 100, which would indicate perfect adherence to the *2005 Dietary Guidelines*.
- The healthfulness of the average consumer food shopping basket did not improve noticeably between 1998 and 2006. Households shifted from refined grains toward whole grains, but allocate less of their food budgets to fruits and vegetables and more toward processed and packaged foods.

Although food purchase behavior varies across some demographic and market segments, all subgroups fall short of meeting the *Guidelines*:

- When comparing consumers across regions of the country, those in the Northeast and West typically purchase more healthful food than consumers in the Midwest or South.
- Higher income shoppers, on average, purchase slightly more healthful food than do lower income shoppers.

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- In terms of differences across races, Whites and Asians typically purchase more healthful foods than Blacks and other non-Asian minorities.
- Market concentration, defined by the number and size of retailers within a market, has a very small negative effect on the healthfulness of consumers' food purchases.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This study uses self-reported purchase data from the Nielsen Homescan database for the years 1998 through 2006. To facilitate the analysis of a data set featuring millions of purchase records, we use aggregate categories from the Quarterly Food-at-Home Price Database, which organizes the Homescan data into major food groups. Our healthfulness measures rely upon the Liberal Food Plan recommendations from the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion as well as the USDA 2005 Healthy Eating Index.