

Conclusions

The previous sections summarized how the use of simple rules of thumb and heuristics may influence what individuals choose to eat, how much they eat, and how they evaluate these decisions after the fact. Incorporating these findings into the study of consumer behavior expands the array of possible ideas that may be considered for food policy, nutrition education, and social marketing.

With small adjustments, standard economic frameworks can incorporate more realism by recognizing that individuals often use simple heuristics, such as placing more weight on default options or using package size to determine quantity, when making food choices. The practical implications of this would be that altering elements of the product, such as package size and shape, the amount of variety, the number of calories, or the default options on a menu, can significantly affect diet quality and consumption volume.

Altering the food environment by increasing the convenience of healthful foods relative to less healthful foods, reducing distractions, or altering the lighting may also make it easier to make choices that are more harmonious with an individual's long-term health objectives.

Recognizing that situational cues, like hunger, stress, or distractions, can increase tendencies to focus on current well-being also expands possible policy and education techniques. Commitment devices, such as allowing individuals to preselect more healthful foods, may be another effective way to help individuals make food choices that align with their own future health goals.

Similarly, explicitly modeling how mental accounting affects individuals' sensitivity to price differences reveals subtle techniques that might be able to significantly improve the quality of food choices. Knowing that people undervalue fixed costs relative to variable costs suggests that allowing people to prepay for healthful items may be another way to strengthen the link between intended and actual behavior.

Willingness to try new foods and a propensity to like them are strongly influenced by the actions of those around us. In terms of nutrition education and marketing, this suggests that who delivers the message and how satisfied they appear may have more of an impact than simple information about the virtues of healthful foods.

These findings expand the list of ideas for improving the diet quality among participants of specific food and nutrition programs, such as food stamps, WIC, and the school meals programs, without limiting freedom of choice. And unlike more traditional interventions, such as changing prices or banning specific food items, many of the proposed changes could be targeted to only those participants who wanted to make choices that are more harmonious with their own (or their parents') long-term health objectives.

This exploration of new ideas is by no means a recommendation or endorsement of any of them. A thorough analysis of costs, benefits, and potential impacts would be needed before any strategy could be considered as a policy option. Many of these suggested ideas may also influence where households shop, how they manage limited resources, and the total package of what

they purchase. Practical and legal issues may also pose hurdles to implementing some of these strategies. As such, an important area for research would be to design experiments and pilot programs to gauge the efficacy, cost, legality, and feasibility of these possibilities. Comparing results of these experiments against estimated costs and benefits of more traditional approaches to nutrition assistance would also clarify the merits of these ideas relative to other strategies.