

Conclusion

The sharp increase in overweight and obesity among Americans has occurred concurrently with increased awareness and publicity regarding the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Examining this phenomenon provides an opportunity to incorporate elements of behavioral economics into consumer food choice analysis. In such analysis, both long-term health objectives and short-term situational factors drive individuals' food choices.

The interaction among these long-term goals and short-term situations can then explain seemingly time-inconsistent choices. The resulting theoretical model predicts that when individuals are experiencing strong visceral influences, such as hunger or stress, their information about health and nutrition will have less impact on their actual food choices. It also predicts that individuals who are less informed about health and nutrition, or consume more food prepared away from home, will be more likely to eschew their longrun goals when faced with short-term situational factors such as hunger. The value of this model is that it explicitly identifies elements that increase demand for goods and services that offer more immediate gratification.

The empirical results confirm that incorporating findings from behavioral economics into the analysis of nutrient intake illuminates how situational factors and long-term health objectives affect our food choices. Specifically, when individuals extend the period between meals or consume more of their food away from home, they are significantly more likely to consume more calories at each eating occasion. Going longer intervals between meals, especially when working more hours in a week, also reduces the diet quality of specific meals.

This study also suggests that in the face of visceral influences, one's intentions may have little to no impact on actual food choices. As people change their dietary goals based on prevailing nutritional beliefs, situational factors like hunger and time pressures will continue to interfere with their long-term health objectives. Making specific reference to such situations and suggesting ways to mitigate their effects should enhance the usefulness of educational campaigns designed to improve diet quality. For example, encouraging consumers to take more active control in limiting the interval between meals and choosing nutrient-dense snacks, such as fruits and vegetables, may help them better align their intentions to eat well with their actual behavior. Limiting intake of foods prepared away from home is also estimated to significantly decrease caloric consumption. Thus, another possibility would be to encourage individuals to plan ahead or seek out information about nutrient and caloric content of foods prepared away from home.