

Can low-income Americans afford a healthy diet?

Could you feed your family on **\$136** per week?

USDA's Thrifty Food Plan demonstrates how low-income households can purchase a healthy diet at a minimal cost. Costs of the Thrifty Food Plan set the maximum benefit amounts for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (previously known as the Food Stamp Program). In June 2008, a four-person household with two children in elementary school needed \$136 per week to purchase a healthy diet. ERS research shows that low-income households spend even less: the median low-income household spent only 95 percent of what was specified by the Thrifty Food Plan in 2006.

Do you spend almost **half** of your food budget on fruits and vegetables?

Households following the Thrifty Food Plan should spend 40 to 50% of their food dollars on fruits and vegetables. By contrast, ERS research shows that for an average household, fruits and vegetables account for 16 to 18% of food spending for at-home consumption in both low- and high-income households. Meats, poultry, fish, and eggs account for about a quarter of food spending. Placing more emphasis on fruits and vegetables helps ensure a healthy diet. These foods are a good source of nutrition for their price.

Could you spend **more time** in the kitchen?

ERS research (based on the American Time Use Survey) shows that low-income women who work full-time spend about 46 minutes per day on meal preparation (approximately 25 minutes less than nonworking women and 10 minutes less than women working part-time). Many households cut down on food preparation time by purchasing ready-to-eat foods. Benefits provided through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program cannot be used to purchase hot ready-to-eat meals from grocery stores or foods from either dine-in or carryout restaurants.

Are healthy foods more **expensive** than other foods?

Many types of healthy foods are as affordable as popular snack foods. ERS research finds that inflation-adjusted prices for 11 basic fresh fruits and vegetables have been trending downward at about the same rate as those for chocolate chip cookies, cola, ice cream, and potato chips. ERS research also finds that low-income households may stretch their food dollars by purchasing more discounted products, less expensive branded foods, volume discounts, or the less expensive items within a type of food.

Are food prices **high** where you live?

ERS research shows that food tends to cost less in suburban communities, where large supermarkets dominate, than in central city communities where retail foodstores tend to be smaller. Because food prices vary across the United States, a given amount of money (and food assistance benefits) may buy less in some locations. Based on data from 1998–2003, ERS researchers also found that average prices for a representative mix of products, including meat, grain, and fruit and vegetable categories, were 8.0 and 11.1% above the national average in the East and West, but 7.0 and 5.2% below the national average in the South and Midwest.

Would a healthy-food **subsidy** help you eat better?

Americans' diets, particularly those of low-income households, fall short of Government dietary recommendations. Research, however, finds that a number of factors, not just prices and income, determine a household's food choices. ERS research estimates that reducing fruit and vegetable prices with a 10% subsidy would encourage low-income Americans to increase their consumption of fruits by 2.1-5.2% and vegetables by 2.1-4.9%. The annual cost of such a subsidy would be about \$310 million for fruits and \$310 million for vegetables. And most low-income Americans would still not meet Federal dietary recommendations. ERS research also finds that, if these households were to receive a small increase in income, they would likely spend more money on beef and frozen prepared foods, for example, rather than on fruits and vegetables.