

# Nutritional Quality of Foods Acquired by Americans: Findings From USDA's National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey

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## What Is the Issue?

Health experts widely agree that Americans' high rates of obesity and diet-related illnesses—including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes—are serious public health concerns. However, policymakers lack agreement on how best to tackle these issues. Because food choices shape dietary patterns over time, understanding the economic and environmental factors that drive these choices can help clarify directions for public education and policy efforts.

In this report, we examine the nutritional quality of foods purchased and acquired and how nutritional quality varies across population subgroups defined by income and by participation in USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program). We also examine differences in nutritional quality by households' access to food retailers, and differences by purchase source (e.g., supermarkets and other grocery sources versus restaurants and other sources primarily selling already prepared foods).

We assess the nutritional quality of households' acquired foods using the Healthy Eating Index-2010 (HEI-2010), a measure based on how well the mix of foods acquired compares to recommendations from the USDA's 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Looking at the foods that households acquired over 1 week, we break down dietary quality by the following subgroups: SNAP participants, low-income nonparticipants, and higher income nonparticipants; food sources (i.e., grocery stores, restaurants, school meal programs, etc.); and access to supermarkets, supercenters, or large grocery stores (by two separate measures—one at the neighborhood level and the other at the household level).

## What Did the Study Find?

- The nutritional quality of foods purchased or otherwise acquired by the overall population scored 53 out of 100 points using USDA's HEI-2010 measure. National estimates of the HEI-2010 of foods consumed by Americans are also low, suggesting that the eating habits of Americans are far from those recommended by the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and that changes in food purchasing and acquisition patterns will be key to diet improvements.

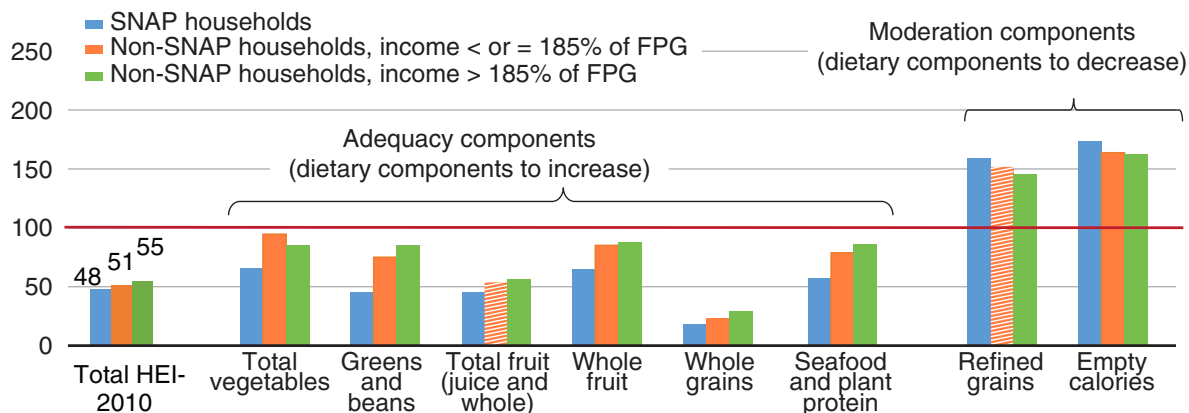
ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- SNAP-participating households had lower HEI-2010 scores than both low-income nonparticipating and higher income households. However, these findings do not prove a causal link between SNAP participation and low diet quality because we did not control for the many ways SNAP-participating households differ from non-participating households, such as age, household composition, and education.

Figure

### Nutritional quality of household food acquisitions by SNAP participation and income

Average component density relative to density needed for maximum Healthy Eating Index-2010 score, percent



Notes: Dashed bars indicate difference from SNAP-participating households is not statistically significant from those of SNAP-nonparticipating households at  $p < 0.05$ . SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. HEI-2010 = Healthy Eating Index-2010. FPG = Federal poverty guidelines.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) estimates using data from USDA's National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS).

- Households with low household-level access to food retail sources had lower HEI-2010 scores than households with better food store access. However, when analysis was limited to SNAP-participating households, total HEI-2010 scores and component densities (another metric relating to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*) did not differ by food store access.
- Across all income groups, acquisitions from food-away-from-home (FAFH) sources were of lower nutritional quality than those from food-at-home (FAH) sources, such as grocery stores, supermarkets, and supercenters. However, for higher income households, the difference in nutritional quality between FAFH and FAH was greater than it was for SNAP-participating households, possibly reflecting that higher income households acquired more FAFH from restaurants or fast-food sources (with relatively low nutritional quality); whereas SNAP-participating households acquired more of their FAFH from sources such as school meals or meals with friends and family (with relatively high nutritional quality).

### How Was the Study Conducted?

This study was conducted using data from USDA's National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS)—a nationally representative survey of noninstitutionalized households in the continental United States. It oversamples four subpopulations: SNAP participants and nonparticipating households in three income levels—(1) less than the Federal poverty guidelines (FPG); (2) between 100 and less than 185 percent of the FPG; (3) and greater than or equal to 185 percent of the Federal poverty level. This survey collected detailed information on all foods purchased or otherwise acquired (school meals; food pantry donations; gardening, hunting, and other home food production; gifts or meals with friends or family, etc.). Analyses were conducted using survey-provided weights to generate representative estimates. We also accounted for survey design in our statistical comparisons across subpopulations.