

THE HIGH COST OF HEALTHY EATING

Why “healthy” is often code for “expensive,” and how to eat well without breaking the bank.

BY AKANKSHA SINGH

IT SOUNDS EASIER THAN IT IS: to eat healthy, stock up on a rainbow of fresh fruits and vegetables, and eat whole grains and protein. Yet the cost of eating healthy is steep, and not just in the “celebrity-turned-health-guru is clueless about the cost of eating healthy” sort of way.

According to a 2013 study published in the *British Medical Journal* titled “Do Healthier Foods and Diet Patterns Cost More Than Less Healthy Options?,” eating a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish, and nuts costs, on average, roughly \$1.50 more per person per day than eating processed foods, meats, and refined grains. That works out to nearly \$550 in higher food costs per person each year.

For low-income families, that’s a sizable number as it is (\$2,200 extra for a family of four to be “healthy”). “The nutrition divide—specifically access to safe, affordable, and nutritious foods—is markedly different for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples living within the U.S.,” says Maya Feller, a Brooklyn-based registered dietitian



nutritionist at Maya Feller Nutrition. “Data tells us that these communities are less likely to have access to full-service grocery stores in comparison to their white counterparts.” Meanwhile, these same communities have better access to fast-food chains—which are cheap but largely unhealthy—in their neighborhoods.

This nutrition divide has become worse over the years, with a constantly evolving list of ingredients being termed “superfoods”—ingredients like berries, kale, and salmon—that have been elevated in status and made their way into our smoothies and onto our plates. While these foods are part of a balanced diet and are packed with vital nutrients, “superfood” is mainly a marketing term that has made the demand for certain foods (the “super” ones) higher—something nutritionist Jennifer Sygo talks about at length in her book *Unmasking Superfoods*.

Combining basic marketing with the fact that some of these foods are sourced from “exotic” locations with ancient histories (looking at you, açai), “superfoods” often come with inflated price tags.

Still, if you’re growing your own berries and kale, or they’re seasonably cheaper at your local farmers’ market, go ahead and stock up on them! Our point here is—just don’t feel pressured to overpay for a bunch of kale when spinach is on sale.

What about foods that haven’t achieved “superfood” status?

Turns out, that’s all largely up to marketing, too. According to a Nielsen survey that was published in 2015, customers are open to paying more for foods that are perceived as healthy. Why? Because the health claims on food labels help. For instance, products with “natural” and “organic” claims grew 24 percent and 28 percent, respectively, between 2012 and 2014. Which is why it’s exceptionally important to look beyond the label. “I think all fruits and vegetables are [still] superfoods,” says Feller. “Bananas are affordable, as are pumpkins, [and] both are good sources of vitamins, minerals, and fiber.”

Additionally, says Alexander Ford, DO, a

registered dietitian at the Cleveland Clinic, we need to reexamine how we look at the price of eating healthy. “Several studies have found that many healthy foods cost more per calorie than less healthy foods,” says Dr. Ford, adding, “[but] there are different ways to measure the cost of a healthy diet. When fruits and vegetables are analyzed by their edible weight or average portion size, then they tend to be less expensive than many processed food options.”

In other words, when you Google something along the lines of “healthy diet for cheaper,” you’re likely to get articles that summarize bang for your buck based on calories rather than edible weight. However, studies comparing the price per edible unit weight of food from the same food group suggest that options that can be labeled healthy are often cheaper.

Think about a package of tofu, say, and chickpeas of the same weight. The chickpeas—especially if you’re buying dry chickpeas—are considerably cheaper and offer a similar protein content and more dietary fiber than the tofu. Again, this isn’t to say tofu is unhealthy in any way, rather that if you’re short on change and looking for a protein source, chickpeas are a great option.

“People should absolutely lean into loving the cultural foods that are supportive of overall health. No one plate will look like another.”

But the cost of eating unhealthy is far more than \$550 per year

We know that eating healthy largely equates to a longer lifespan and that not doing so has the opposite impact. But if you take into account the cost of the damage of a diet that relies heavily on processed food, the cost of being healthy is nowhere near representative of the cost of being unhealthy, with its subsequent diet-related chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. In 2010, sub-optimal diet quality was estimated to account for 14 percent of the number of years lost due to ill health, disability, or early death in the U.S., according to the Global Burden of Disease Study. And a 2019 study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that, globally, if people ate healthier, we could see 11 million fewer premature deaths—which accounted for as much as 24 percent of total deaths in 2017.

FOOD DOESN'T
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So how can we eat healthy without breaking the bank?

Well, experts say a good first step is learning to understand the “healthy eating” trap and avoid falling into it. Reading labels and doing your homework can save you from having to pay costly medical bills in the long run.

Dr. Ford says that one of the biggest healthy eating traps that he’s seen (especially in low-income populations) is purchasing processed food items marketed as healthy. “For example,” says Dr. Ford, “some fruit snacks are fortified with vitamins, claiming to help consumers meet their recommended nutrient requirements. In reality, these snacks are simply candy with added vitamins and often high in sugar.”

Even grains like oatmeal, suggests Dr. Ford, are easily marketed as healthy even if they contain tons

of added sugar. “Oatmeal is a good source of complex carbohydrates and fiber that aid in managing cholesterol and blood sugar levels,” he says. “[However], many food companies offer flavored oatmeal, which is often higher in sugar and calories. It is important to read Nutrition Facts labels, especially the ingredient list. Manufacturers list ingredients by weight, with the most abundant listed first, [so] consumers should be wary of food items that contain sugar and salt as some of their first ingredients.”

Compare nutrient-dense foods and see what makes the most sense

“There’s a strategy to eating healthy on a budget,” says Dr. Ford. “Understanding the benefits of nutrient-dense foods and how they augment health

can help a consumer make economic choices.” For example, he says, common breakfast items like doughnuts and fruit salad both provide energy to help fuel your day. However, the quality of the energy is different. “Fruit salad contains fiber to aid in digestion and fullness and complex carbohydrates that provide sustained energy. While doughnuts also offer energy, most of the calories are derived from unhealthy fats and simple carbohydrates that provide less nutritional value and less fullness.”

“Healthy” comes in many shapes, sizes, and budgets

Additionally, Feller stresses, there is no single definitive approach when it comes to eating healthy. “People absolutely should lean into loving the cultural foods that are supportive of overall health. We can move beyond [a plate of] grilled animal protein, brown rice, and steamed vegetables as the pinnacle of a healthy plate,” she says, adding, “herbs, spices, alternative grains, beans, nuts, and seeds are all wonderful and incorporated into many

Shopping on a Budget

Easy, expert-approved affordable swaps to make while getting healthy.

- Look for generic or store-brand options.
- Swap out the flavored version of your oatmeal for unflavored or plain rolled oats.
- Buy frozen, tinned, and dried fruits and vegetables, which are often cheaper than their fresh counterparts but maintain their nutrients. They also keep longer, meaning less food waste.
- Try low-sodium canned beans, dry beans, and lentils.
- Consider switching to shelf-stable, nondairy milk that lasts longer.
- Add brown rice and whole-wheat bread to your pantry staples.
- Freeze leftover vegetables (including celery, lettuce, bok choy, fresh herbs, and green onions) to make a broth later.
- Buy local, in-season produce to keep your cost (and your carbon footprint) low. If time allows, go ahead and pickle or preserve seasonal things for later.
- Avoid food waste and save money by taking a weekly inventory and doing meal prep with stuff that’s already in your fridge.

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Waste not, want not

The average American household wastes food worth \$1,866 each year, according to a 2020 study from Penn State. It stands to reason, suggests “zero waste chef” Anne-Marie Bonneau, that if you don’t waste food, you don’t waste money.

Bonneau went “zero waste”—a lifestyle that aims not to create any waste through whatever you consume—after adopting a plastic-free lifestyle. Bonneau, who is based in California, says her lifestyle ensures she eats local, seasonal produce that is lower on the food chain, and by doing so, she keeps her costs low and her diet nutrient-rich. “That saves money,” she says. “[I eat] a lot more beans and lentils than I used to!”

She’s also inadvertently become a healthier eater by not giving in to the luxury of what she wants to eat compared to what she has (on hand) to eat. “In the old days, I’d think, ‘What do I feel like eating tonight?’ I’d come up with something or look through a cookbook, find a recipe, and say, ‘OK, that looks good.’ Then [I’d] make a shopping list and buy all that stuff,” she says. Now she looks through her fridge and pantry and works with what she’s got—so much so that she has cut down on the odd weekly shop by reimagining her leftovers.

It’s a trade-off time-wise, she admits, since you do have to invest time to plan and prepare meals and groceries, but it’s well worth the effort of knowing exactly what goes into your food (and where it came from). For instance, take a jar of pasta sauce. Apart from tomatoes, garlic, herbs, and higher-than-home-made amounts of salt and sugar, most contain additives and soybean or canola oil; you’d be far better off making your own sauce at home.

But more than focus on doing everything perfectly, take steps to do little things to the best of your ability. Swap out your apple-and-cinnamon instant oats that are loaded with sugar and prepare some overnight oatmeal instead. Or start by simply reading up on the ingredients in the bread of the sandwich you take to work. Little changes can add up in a big way. ●

BANANAS ARE A QUICK, HEALTHY CHOICE THAT CAN BE ADDED TO OATMEAL OR A SMOOTHIE.

