

Healthy and Affordable Diet Consumed Away from Home

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INTRODUCTION

The typical American diet is energy-rich but nutrient-poor and a link between suboptimal dietary patterns and many chronic diseases (e.g. cancers, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes) has been established. Diet quality has been positively associated with socioeconomic status; thus, individuals in low-income groups are at increased chronic disease risk [1].

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, is the largest domestic food and nutrition assistance program administered by the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. The original goal of SNAP was to fight hunger. However, food provision alone does not necessarily lead to healthy dietary intake. With welfare reform and the changing food environment, a major problem facing those in poverty is the overconsumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Nutrition education programs aimed at improving SNAP participants' nutrition knowledge are in place. However, consistent improvements in diet quality have not been reported. Thus, educational messages promoting the health benefits of foods and dietary patterns, without considering other contributing and competing factors, are unlikely to be effective.

Consumption of food prepared away from home plays an increasingly large role in the American diet. A number of factors contributed to the trend of increased dining out since the 1970s, including a larger share of women employed outside the home, more two-earner households, higher incomes, more affordable and convenient fast food outlets, increased advertising and promotion by large foodservice chains, and the smaller size of U.S. households. ERS economists examine factors influencing this trend as well as:

Nutritional quality of food away from home.

Effect on overweight and obesity.

Economic assessment of a food-away-from-home nutrition labeling policy, and

Effect of dietary knowledge on food and nutrient intakes.

ERS research comparing nutritional quality of food prepared at home and away from home has been used to develop Federal

dietary guidelines, such as the Dietary Guidelines for Americans [2].

ERS researchers have examined the growing availability of Food Away From Home (FAFH) in a new report which presents research on food choices and availability; nutrition and diet quality; and food policies, including menu labeling and food assistance programs. The report also examines how FAFH choices relate to diet quality and socio demographic characteristics [3].

Consumption of Food Away From Home (FAFH; including eating on and off premises) has increased substantially in recent years. FAFH as a percentage of total household food expenditure rose from 17% in 1929 to 49% in 2007. The need for convenience, taste, and variety (attributes of FAFH) is sizable across all income strata: The typical low-income household spent ~ 27% of their total food dollars away from home and another 12% on prepared foods, while higher income households spent ≥ 50% of their total food dollars on FAFH. It may be unrealistic to assume that low-income families have the adequate time, skills, and food access to prepare only healthy homemade meals. To be effective, nutrition interventions should consider a role for consumption of FAFH and provide guidance on healthy FAFH selections. Furthermore, the economic stimulus package recently signed into law raised the maximum SNAP allotment by 13.6%; this level is expected to remain constant for the next 3-5 y. This increase in SNAP benefits may free portions of participants' own money that they can use freely in FAFH. Meanwhile, during this current economic downtime, money-saving and convenient diets that are still nutritious will be more applicable, especially for the low-income families [4,5].

CONCLUSION

The American Dietetic Association advocates a total diet approach in stating that: "the total diet or overall pattern of food eaten is the most important focus of a healthful eating style. All foods can fit...if consumed in moderation with appropriate portion size and combined with regular physical activity." Several limitations of this analysis should be acknowledged. As stated before, NHANES data are based on USDA food databases, which accounts for the different foods chosen at home

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compared with away from home but not differences in preparation techniques.

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