

The Growing Price Gap Between Healthy and Junk Food

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December 28, 2011



A new study published in the journal *Food Policy*¹ documents the increasing price gap between foods high in nutrition and foods that can be classified as junk foods.

The study's authors, from the University of Washington's Center for Public Health Nutrition and the Nutritional Sciences Program, followed the prices of selected foods in the U.S. over a four-year period from 2004 to 2008.

The pricing of foods in a healthy diet, such as nutrient-dense vegetables and whole grains, was compared to nutrient-poor foods, such as those high in fat, table sugar and refined grains.

The researchers approached this comparison very scientifically. They measured the energy content of foods in calories per unit of weight (grams) and compared that to a measure of the nutrient content of food provided per calorie. Beneficial nutrients measured included protein, fiber, monounsaturated fatty acids and vitamins and minerals. Unhealthy nutrients measured included saturated fat, added table sugar and sodium (an element found in salt).

Over the four-year period, the scientists found that the price of the top 20 percent of healthy, nutritionally dense foods increased 29.2 percent compared to a rise of only 16.3 percent for the least nutritionally dense foods. Obviously, this disparity hardly encourages people to purchase and eat more healthy foods. As the authors stated in the publication, **"There is a growing price disparity between nutrient-dense foods and less nutritious options.... Cost may pose a barrier to the adoption of healthier diets and so limit the impact of dietary guidance."**

Every five years dietary guidelines are reviewed and updated by a joint committee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The guidelines currently in use were published in 2005; the updated guidelines will be published by the end of 2010. **The new guidelines are expected to again emphasize that people should shift food intake patterns to a more plant-based diet, emphasizing vegetables, fruits and whole grains, and reduce the intake of foods high in sugar, added fat and salt.** The authors of the study suggest that rising prices could make this goal unrealistic for some. They stated, "The sharp increase observed for nutrient-rich foods relative to other, less nutritious foods indicates that economic constraints may pose a barrier to a healthful diet."

What does all this mean? **It strengthens the case for one of the Council for Responsible Nutrition's (CRN) "three pillars of wellness," namely appropriate nutritional supplementation.** Supplementation is something that will help restore nutritional balance in the diet of those unable, for whatever reason, to follow nutritional guidelines.

¹ "The rising disparity in the price of healthful foods: 2004–2008," Monsivais P., et al. *Food Policy* (2010), doi:10.1016/j.foodpol.2010.06.004