

U.S. Healthy Eating Trends Part 3: Healthy Doesn't Have to Cost More

January 28, 2010

Tony Pirovano, Director of Industry Insights



Part 3 of 5 on Healthy Eating Trends and Myths

One common misconception heard frequently is that healthy eating has become too expensive—that the struggling economy has driven U.S. families to make poor nutritional choices. Using a wealth of scanned checkout data from food, drug and mass merchandise retailers, Nielsen monitors food sales trends to separate the truth from perceptions.

While the economy can be blamed for sales declines of some foods, there is overwhelming evidence to support that healthy eating doesn't have to cost more. In fact, the packaged food industry has made great strides on multiple fronts by adding more healthy nutrients, and removing saturated fats, calories and sodium from foods wherever possible, all while holding the line on costs.

Consider these facts:

- **Low-cost healthy alternatives are readily available.** Although organic foods often cost more than non-organic, supermarkets offer several healthy alternatives for a given food item at the same price. Consider diet sodas, low-fat dairy, light beer, low-sodium crackers, low-sugar cereals and oatmeal. Even the higher-priced natural food channel managed to hold overall price increases to just 1.4% for the year end 2009, according to SPINS.
- **Fast food “value” meals can't compete with supermarket pricing.** What you really get from a quick-serve restaurant is quick service. Convenience will save time, but not save money. Supermarket alternatives are often cheaper and healthier, but they take more time to prepare. For example, a \$1 sausage biscuit from a drive-thru has 31% more calories and nearly 7 times more fat than TWO bowls of instant oatmeal with an average retail price of 31 cents per packet.
- **The lowest cost beverage solution is the most healthful.** With zero calories and 24/7 availability, water is still the least expense beverage in most homes. Sales of packaged beverages in U.S. food/drug/mass retailers exceeded \$85 billion in 2009. Just think; the money saved by drinking tap water could bail out a bank.
- **It's not what we eat, it's how much.** Contrary to popular opinion, less is not always more—especially when it comes to counting calories. Eating less is always less expensive than eating more. And although no one ever likes to hear this, the most successful diets are the ones that involve less food.
- **Eating poorly almost always costs more.** Forget about the long-term medical costs of obesity. Healthy eating costs less right now and despite the economy, consumers are actively taking steps to improve their diets as evidenced by the double-digit growth rates for products with label claims for omega (+42%), high fructose corn syrup free (+29%), antioxidants (+16%), gluten free / probiotic / calcium claim (+13%), fiber claim (+12%), and low glycemic / no salt or sodium added (+10%).

The real opportunity cost of healthy eating is convenience (and sometimes taste), not the dollars spent. Although preparing meals at home may take more time, it enables families to eat well without breaking their budgets, and afford the chance to spend quality time together at meals. And consumers are eager to make it work. According to Nielsen, amateur chefs drove cooking/health and healing book sales into the stratosphere with a 31% annual growth rate during a year when total book sales were down 3%. A hunger for knowledge had more than one million viewers tuning in to The Food Network during prime time and 11% of Internet surfers visiting food web sites.

Sometimes the benefits of healthy eating are more intangible, but equally important to physical and mental development and the family. Multiple independent studies drew a direct correlation between family meal time attendance, better nutrition and improved children's grades.

Article from Nielsen Wire: <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire>

URL to article: <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/u-s-healthy-eating-trends-part-3-eating-healthy-doesn%e2%80%99t-have-to-cost-more/>

Copyright © The Nielsen Company. All rights reserved.