

Conclusion

Among the 69 forms of fruits and 85 forms of vegetables included in the analysis, more than half were estimated to cost 25 cents or less per serving in 1999, and 86 percent of all vegetables and 78 percent of all fruit cost less than 50 cents a serving. That's 127 different ways to eat a serving of fruits and vegetables for less than the price of a 3-ounce candy bar. In fact, consumers can meet the FGP recommendations of three servings of fruits and four servings of vegetables daily for as little as 64 cents. Consumers trying to meet the 5-a-day challenge could do so for even less.

Are fresh fruit and vegetables more expensive to eat than processed? According to our findings, definitely not. After adjusting for waste and serving size, 63 percent of fruits and 57 percent of vegetables were cheapest in their fresh form. However, these data do not consider spoilage. Expectations that fresh produce will go bad and be thrown out may be responsible for consumers' perception that fresh produce is more expensive than processed. Regardless, consumers need to be savvy and consider not only the price per pound, but also the number of servings obtainable from a pound.

Even though fresh fruits and vegetables are generally cheaper to eat than processed, for many fruits and vegetables the difference in price per serving between the cheapest and most expensive forms was often less than 25 cents. For some, this price difference may be a small price to pay for the conveniences—such as longer shelf life, ease of preparation, and greater availability—associated with processed forms. Although the prices for fruits and vegetables in this study are national averages for the entire year and not the prices that any household might face on a given day, they amply demonstrate that cost need not be a barrier to consumption of the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables.

Economic literature suggests that consumers do not respond strongly to changes in prices of fruits and vegetables (Huang, 1993; Huang and Lin, 2000). However, it is clear that consumers buy more of the lower priced items. Among the 154 forms of fruits and vegetables included in the study, 27 percent (41 forms) cost less than the weighted-average price per pound, yet they accounted for 60 percent of total sales volume and 41 percent of total expenditures.