The Hidden Costs of Nutrition

Previous studies have found that starting to eat a healthy diet, starting to exercise and stopping smoking early in life helps protect against long-term risk of death from coronary heart disease, cancer and stroke. But few of those studies have examined the economic effects. We think more of the cost of those fruits and vegetables at the time of purchase. The following is part of an article from Health Day News.

“To our knowledge, no other study has linked eating patterns to health-care cost,” lead researcher Dr. Martha L. Daviglus, an associate professor at Northwestern University's department of preventive medicine, said in a statement. The research was presented at the American Heart Association's Second Asia Pacific Scientific Forum, 2003.

Dr. Martha Daviglus and her colleagues evaluated 1,070 men who worked at the Chicago Western Electric Company in 1957-58 and were 40 to 55 years old at the time. At the time of the baseline examination all of them were free of heart disease.

The researchers examined Medicare health costs (adjusted to the value of the dollar in the year 2000) for the men more than 25 years later.

The men were classified into three groups based on their fruit and vegetable consumption in 1959: low, less than 14 cups per month; middle, 14 to 42 cups per month; high, more than 42 cups per month.

The 237 men in the high group had the lowest total annual Medicare charges ($11,416) and the lowest charges related to coronary heart disease and cardiovascular disease. The 290 men in the low group had annual Medicare charges of $14,655. The 543 men in the middle group had annual charges of $12,622.

“These associations were not influenced by cardiovascular risk factors such as age, obesity, blood cholesterol, blood pressure, smoking or by other dietary factors. Our findings suggest that high intake of fruits and vegetables — which may reflect healthy
eating habits in middle age — has a beneficial impact not only on future health but also on health-care costs in older people,” Daviglus said.

She added that the findings also support current dietary guidelines, which recommend that people eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day. That's much higher than what's included in the average American diet.

Remember that the study above was in the early part of the century. It may be interesting to see what the costs are adjusted to today’s dollar. More recently, the Harvard School of Public Health did a meta-analysis of the cost of a healthy diet compared to a not-so-healthy one. They found that the healthy diet pattern, rich in lean meats, fruits and vegetables, costs $1.50 a day more than less healthy diets.

Is it ever too late to start eating your fruits and vegetables? Absolutely not. You may question whether you can afford to eat healthy, but in the long run, can you afford not to?

Look at the following recommendations and see if you come close to getting all the servings you may need for optimum health:

**Lightly Active: An average of less than 30 minutes of exercise a day**
- Women ages 19-30: 2 cups fruits plus 2 1/2 cups veggies equals 4 1/2 cups total
- Men ages 19-50: 2 cups fruits plus 3 cups veggies equals 5 cups total
- Women ages 31-50: 1 1/2 cups fruits plus 2 1/2 cups veggies equals 4 cups total
- Men ages 51+: 2 cups fruits plus 2 1/2 cups veggies equals 4 1/2 cups total
- Women ages 51+: 1 1/2 cups fruits plus 2 cups veggies equals 3 1/2 cups total

**Moderately Active: An average of 30 to 60 minutes of exercise a day**
- Women ages 19-50: 2 cups fruits plus 2 1/2 cups veggies equals 4 1/2 cups total
- Men ages 19-30: 2 cups fruits plus 3 1/2 cups veggies equals 5 1/2 cups total
- Women ages 31-50: 1 1/2 cups fruits plus 2 1/2 cups veggies equals 4 cups total
- Men ages 51+: 2 cups fruits plus 3 cups veggies equals 5 cups total

**Very Active: An average of 60 minutes of exercise or more a day**
- Men ages 19-30: 2 1/2 cups fruits plus 4 cups veggies equals 6 1/2 cups total
- Women ages 19-50: 2 cups fruits plus 3 cups veggies equals 5 cups total
- Men ages 31-50: 2 1/2 cups fruits plus 3 1/2 cups veggies equals 6 cups total
- Women ages 51+: 2 cups fruits plus 2 1/2 cups veggies equals 4 1/2 cups total
- Men ages 51+: 2 cups fruits plus 3 cups veggies equals 5 cups total

It is a real challenge to meet the recommended requirements. Think about how you choose to spend your grocery money. Next time you check out, save your receipt and look it over. How many items are calorie-dense or nutrient-dense? Can you make different choices to get more nutrient-dense items on your next receipt? Think about the hidden costs in the future.
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