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## Speaking of food

Sometimes I feel like a dietician. I spend a good part of every day at the office telling people what and how to eat: less meat and more vegetables; less trans fat and more polyunsaturates; less sodium and more potassium; home-cooked meals rather than fast food; smaller portions rather than supersizing; fresh rather than processed; water rather than soda; 1% rather than full cream; fruit rather than candy; whole grain rather than white flour; 2 drinks rather than 6; more chicken and fish, less beef and pork; smaller portion sizes; bake it, don't fry it.

The pushback I get is varied:

- Doc, it's the holidays!
- Fresh vegetables aren't available this time of year.
- My kids won't eat those things.
- It's how I relax on the weekend.
- I deserve a treat now and then.
- Healthy foods cost more.

Some of these arguments are just flimsy excuses; others are harder to counter. For example, healthy foods do cost more. To find out how much more, a group of researchers sifted through 27 studies from 10 countries reporting the prices and nutritional content of foods from around the world.<sup>1</sup>

After digesting this vast amount of information, the researchers concluded that healthy dietary choices cost about \$1.50 more per day per person than poor dietary choices. Although this price difference is a big deal for folks in the third world, I suspect most Americans can handle \$1.50 a day—less than the cost of that coffee your doctor probably doesn't want you to have.

Still, \$1.50 a day adds up to \$45 a month. So if your terrible American diet gives you hypertension, elevated cholesterol, and diabetes, you can always get a month's worth of amlodipine, pravastatin, and metformin for about \$12. By eating terrible food but being compliant with your pills, you still come out ahead \$33 a month, every month, right up until the time of your heart attack.

This is oddly perverse economics. But perhaps it explains, at least in some small part, why I need to keep having this conversation.



**Jon O. Neher, MD**

## REFERENCE

1. Rao M, Afsin A, Singh G, Mozaffarian D. Do healthier foods and diet patterns cost more than less healthy options? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open*. 2013; 3(12):e004277.