

And there's food for the driven

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Nutrition

Cheap Foods That Are Good For You

Rebecca Ruiz, 03.16.10, 4:00 PM ET

Every few months, the food cognoscenti start touting a new super food for its ability to ward off disease. Hot foods in recent years include wild salmon (\$15 a pound and packed with omega-3 fatty acids), antioxidant-loaded leeks (\$3 a bunch), and the exotic açai and goji berries (as much as \$20 and \$40 per 16 ounces, respectively). These foods are packed with nutrients but can send your grocery bill into the stratosphere.

You can get all the nutrition you need for much less money if you shop carefully. A cup of cooked navy beans has a similar amount of protein as 3 ounces of salmon, and is loaded with more magnesium, phosphorous and potassium. One large orange has almost seven times the amount of vitamin C and more fiber than a cup of raw blueberries, at a small fraction the berries' price this time of year. A \$3 bunch of dark green, leafy kale is a big nutritional improvement on watery iceberg lettuce--but broccoli has just as many nutrients at half the price.

Ten Cheap Foods That Are Good For You

These are comparisons that Adam Drewnowski, the director of the Center for Public Health Nutrition at the University of Washington, has focused on in recent years. To help ordinary Americans who don't have unlimited budgets, Drewnowski has created an index ranking the most affordable healthy foods, ones that are packed with essential nutrients.

Drewnowski favors basic foods that are widely available year-round. His approach is the opposite of one taken by *Omnivore's Dilemma* author Michael Pollan, who has championed unprocessed, locally grown foods. "These foods give you maximum nutrition per dollar," Drewnowski says.

Many items that rank high on his list, including milk, broccoli, beans, and tomato juice, won't surprise anyone. Others are a little more curious: Eggs make the cut despite their high cholesterol content because they are cheap and packed with protein and nutrients. Potatoes (skin on) also do well. And a few items on the index are jaw-dropping. If you believe Drewnowski, hamburger is a health food. He maintains that its high levels of protein and affordable price outweigh its huge saturated fat content.

Critics see a different reason why products like eggs and hamburger rise to the top. Drewnowski's research, it turns out, is funded by an association of industry and government groups known as the Nutrient Rich Coalition. Members include the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Dairy Council, the National Pork Board and the Florida Department of Citrus. Drewnowski is a scientific advisor to the coalition. His list is being published in a supplement to the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in April.

"Whether it was on purpose or indirectly, he created an approach that focuses on nutrients you get from" the sources who funded him, says Barry Popkin, a nutrition professor at the University of North Carolina. "It creates an appearance of a major conflict of interest." Popkin argues that Drewnowski's methodology favors protein-rich animal products like eggs, milk and yogurt over fruits, vegetable and whole grains, with many nutrients but less protein. (Popkin has his own conflicts; he has gotten research funding from the beef, cereal and bottled water industries.) He also says the emphasis on cheap animal products ignores the association between excessive consumption of saturated fat and major chronic conditions such as obesity and heart disease.

Drewnowski denies that industry funding influenced his research results. To come up with his index, Drewnowski ranked foods based on their concentrations of nine essential nutrients (protein, fiber, calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, vitamins A, C, E). Foods also scored points for having low amounts of added sugar, sodium and saturated fat. Then he adjusted by price per serving. Milk and white bread, for example, both cost \$0.17 per serving, but the milk does well on the index because it has five times the nutritional score as the bread.

Drewnowski says that apples, bananas, broccoli and numerous other fruits and vegetables make the list. But he admits that people should stick to reduced-fat hamburger, and limit their egg intake.

Popkin would take a different approach to helping Americans eat better. He recently published a paper in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* showing that an 18% tax on soda would lead to five pounds of weight loss for Americans annually and a reduced diabetes risk. Popkin and his team based their estimate on a 20-year longitudinal study that included more than 5,100 participants. When their purchasing patterns were tracked along with price fluctuations, the researchers found that the people drink less soda the more expensive it becomes.

But if you do decide to save money at the store by purchasing less expensive, nutritious items, here's a lesson to remember: Don't spend the savings on junk food. Recent research by University at Buffalo psychologist Leonard Epstein demonstrated that consumers are inclined to do just that.

In a lab-based simulated shopping experience, 42 mothers selected foods and beverages whose prices kept changing. When high-calorie, nutrition-poor foods like Pop-Tarts, Doritos and soda were expensive, the shoppers purchased far fewer calories overall. But when the price of healthy items like nonfat yogurt, peppers and Cheerios also went down, the shoppers didn't pocket the savings. They compensated by buying more junk food.

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