

Why Making Healthful Foods Cheaper Isn't Enough

by ALLISON AUBREY



Paul Vernon/AP

Researchers found that moms were more likely to stop buying junk food when it cost more.

March 15, 2010

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Bucks for broccoli or cash for carrots? Financial incentives aimed at encouraging healthier choices are catching on from New Zealand to the Philippines. Workplaces in the United States have been offering incentives for weight loss. In a London-based study, dieters got paid when they dropped pounds. Now researchers are interested in understanding how food price manipulations may influence what ends up in mothers' grocery carts. Does increasing the cost of sugary items mean fewer people buy them? Would more people buy veggies if they were more affordable?

To create successful incentives, says Yale behavioral economist Dean Karlan, a policy needs to specifically target the people whose behavior its trying to change. "So in the case of broccoli you'd want to find out who's not eating broccoli and then pay them to eat it," he says. You don't want to necessarily make broccoli cheaper for those who are already buying plenty of it, you want to target those who don't buy enough fruits or vegetables. It could be very tricky to structure such an incentive.

To find out how prices influence choices, researchers at the University of Buffalo set up an experiment where they could control food prices and see how shoppers responded. For their study, they recruited a bunch of moms to shop for groceries in the simulated supermarket and gave them each the same amount of money. In the first shopping trip, the food prices were identical to what was being offered at the local grocery chain.

But then the researchers manipulated prices several different ways. First they discounted the prices of healthful foods — making items such as fruits and vegetables much cheaper. They tried a 12.5-percent discount, then a 25-percent discount.

"Then we looked at the purchasing patterns of these mothers," explains Len Epstein, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Buffalo who was involved in the study. He says the mothers' choices were somewhat predictable. When the costs went down, "they did buy more of the healthy foods."

A Surprising Effect

But since the healthful items now cost a lot less, the moms had money leftover. Epstein says they used it to buy more junk food.

"When you put it all together, their shopping baskets didn't have improved nutrition," says Epstein — they had the same amounts of fats and carbohydrates.

If subsidizing healthful foods leads to the unintended consequence of people spending more on junk, might there be another way to structure incentives?

The researchers tried a different price manipulation: They basically placed a hefty tax on high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. They found that that moms stopped buying so much junk.

The researchers say their findings suggest that the taxes were more effective than subsidies. This conclusion doesn't surprise Karlan. He cites the theory of loss aversion: "People are just more responsive to price increases than decreases."

Karlan says a "sin tax" — charging more for unhealthful foods — would not change families' diets or approach to nutrition overnight. But it could serve as a first step in raising awareness of bad habits, alerting us to the kinds of things we choose to snack on.

Effecting Change In The Real World

All kids love a treat. And the students at the Argenziano School in Somerville, Mass., are no exception.

Some of their favorites? "Skittles" calls out one seventh-grader. "Doritos," says student Marcos Azerbido. "I used to bring Doritos every day."

But not anymore. These days, fresh fruit is the only choice for their mid-morning snack. On their way out the door for recess the kids reach into bins filled with apples and bananas and other fruits depending on the season. The fruit is funded through a USDA grant, and free to the students.

"Once they get it every day, they'll eat like three bananas," says teacher Sharyn Lamer, who has tried for years to enforce a healthful snack rule in her classroom. She says when parents were sending their kids to school with chips or sugary treats it was tough.

"But now it's the rule in the entire school. And the kids are into it," says Lamer. "It's not me being the mean teacher who's not letting them have their Doritos!"

As habits change at school, Lamer says the students may think differently about their choices at home.

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Mary Glendening (Wooby) wrote:

I think kids aren't given enough credit for being able to make good choice themselves. My kid loves veggies and sometimes this is the only part of a meal he will eat. Given the choice between a chicken nugget and a piece of brocolli he'll usually eat the brocolli first.

I think education is key in the long run. There are usually fresh veggies on sale at the local grocery store and frozen veggies are a good choice as well since they are flash frozen and peek freshness sealing in their nutruients. Not everything needs to be organic, I think there are like 10 foods that are more important to eat organic but an organic toaster pasty is just a pop-tart in disguise! Nutrition and healthy lifestyles should be part of the curriculum and emphasized in schools. Kids going home and asking for fruits and veggies can go a long way with parents who may just think their kids don't like that stuff.

Monday, March 15, 2010 3:40:53 PM

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R P (Rinki) wrote:

Most people buy cheap, processed junk food because they like it, it has the perception of being affordable, and its convenient.

The companies who sell this crap (KRAFT, ConAgra, etc.) would have you believe that there is value and nutrition in their products. Huge profits are to be had in packaged foods, and the conventional grocers are more than happy to 'give the people what they want'.

Here's a good rule of thumb: Try to stay on the outer edges of the store while shopping. Going into the aisles means trouble. (Of course, I'm probably preaching to the choir.)

BTW, if the government didn't provide subsidies for things like GMO corn and soy this junk wouldn't be 'affordable' in the first place.

Monday, March 15, 2010 3:06:45 PM

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Alexis Better (rewq) wrote:

If there was more support fore food co-ops it would make organic food cheap for every american. real co-ops though like the park-slope food co-op work 3 hours a month and get food on a 5% mark up from whole sale.

Monday, March 15, 2010 3:05:14 PM

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Sherry Knecht (S_Knecht) wrote:

I think that at least one element of the study design probably skewed the results compared to what would happen in 'real life.' By giving the mothers a set sum of money to spend on the groceries, the mothers all knew they had that much to spend. There was likely no incentive for them to spend less. In real life, if we are able to save money on our grocery bill, it might mean we can set some aside, or spend it on something else that we want. I certainly have that awareness; if I am given a set amount to spend and it turns out that I have extra, I too might be guilty of buying a treat with the extra, although I normally try to keep my family's diet very healthy. On my own dime, I would be less likely to do so.

Nevertheless, an it's a valuable study on a critical topic, and thank you to NPR for reporting.

Monday, March 15, 2010 2:24:18 PM

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Irene Cardenas (irenesee) wrote:

The idea that people would still like some unhealthy foods if they'd always had free choice has been challenged. According to The Indigo Children by Lee Carroll: "An experiment was done in the 1970s with a large number of children two and a half years and under. They were presented with a large buffet of foods each time they ate. They were allowed to choose whatever they liked with no admonitions. Contrary to what the researchers expected, the children chose a variety of nutritious foods and did not overdo sweets. One child with rickets drank cod liver oil until the rickets were cured."

If an apple radiates vibrant vitality, it imparts that when consumed, so people can then be and feel radiant inside. Would we be eating healthy foods had our so-called advanced agriculture and food processing technologies not set people up for diseases and their associated medical technologies, like pharmaceuticals, which themselves are poisons that interfere with metabolism? Has so-called "success" done people in if it hasn't advanced in coordination with nature, which is a greater power? Does nature provide gifts like a mom; if they aren't respected, they are withdrawn?

@lan: The broccoli with soy sauce and garlic sounds good to me.

Monday, March 15, 2010 2:22:00 PM

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Justin F (burntchemistry) wrote:

Farmers markets can sometimes offer a cheaper alternative for fresh produce compared with grocery stores. But that depends entirely on where one lives.

Monday, March 15, 2010 1:23:24 PM

[Recommend \(3\)](#)

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Dee McKinney (graiae66) wrote:

I live in a small, rural community. Veggies here at one of the two small grocery stores are not cheap, and organic is rarely available and even more expensive (\$4 peppers or heads of broccoli, \$5 bags of carrots, etc. I avoid buying food at Walmart if I can.) The nearest organic/healthy grocery store is about an hour away. We have tried to solve some of these problems with access by raising our own eggs (chickens), making mozzarella from dry milk, baking our own bread (grinding the wheat, too), and growing veggies in the summer. I love to cook with fresh veggies, but it isn't always possible. It's not just a matter of money, but availability as well. And on a side note, stop slamming pizza--our homemade whole wheat crust with homemade mozzarella and tomato sauce isn't that bad...even if we throw some homemade sausage on it (drained and rinsed).

Monday, March 15, 2010 1:20:15 PM

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Jordan Miller (jmiller826) wrote:

Eliminate subsidies for corn, the dirt-cheap ingredient in all junk food. And move the food regulations/labeling OUT of the USDA's hands and into the dept of health and human services. Maybe we'll get honesty in the battle against obesity.

Monday, March 15, 2010 1:18:11 PM

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Stuart Knoles (Calen) wrote:

I see in this report the continued valid attempt at approaching health promotion through behavior modification; yet this may be declared overwhelmingly evident an insufficient approach. Looking for the key. Basically a sorely ineffective healthcare system - ineffective approach to producing health. Nutrition is undeniably a fundamental of living; and the fundamental pillars of nutrition are, believe it or not I venture to present: whole foods (as nature packages), variety of foods, and attention, reverence, happiness and harmony in the consumption of that food. Through a simple, easily learned procedure, a person can have the direct abstract experience of health. It has been observed that as a result, automatically and spontaneously desires, thoughts, and, therefore behavior begins to more and more support that experience of health, because, naturally behavior supports the desire for more. Attention becomes more instrumental in fulfilling the needs of the body to bring about increasing enjoyment of life. This would also serve as well to bring about much needed alignment in the production and delivery of food. The key to unlocking the supermarket of health?

Monday, March 15, 2010 1:14:07 PM

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T A (Gift_of_kindness) wrote:

An admirable effort, but I just don't see any of this having much impact long term. Here's what's helped my family and extended family: A.) grow your own food as often and as much as possible. Little kids who can pick their own broccoli for a small part of any year LOVE the stuff and will eat it all year long. B.) Strangely, having severe food allergies in the family (and the necessary imposition of food-oriented sanctions in a home) keep the fresh fruits and veggies flowing. A kid with food allergies (or his family members) knows that he can safely choose fresh fruits/vegetables when most other food is suspected of being enemy #1.

Not that I'm encouraging anyone to acquire a food allergy, but if your family knows of a kid with a severe food allergy, empathize and try to avoid his allergen for a month. Trust me, you'll eat Many more fruits and vegetables (and basics like rice). That month, in and of itself, might just shift you away from junk food.

Who says that food allergies are a complete curse? We've found quite a silver lining in this uniqueness that extends throughout the family... we just eat healthier.

Monday, March 15, 2010 1:07:25 PM

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