

Purpose: BECR facilitates new and innovative research on the application of behavioral economics theory to healthy food choice behaviors that would contribute to enhancing the nutrition, food security, and health of American consumers. BECR is particularly interested in promoting healthy and cost-effective food choices for participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Vision: To use behavioral economics principles and strategies to promote healthy, economical food choices among WIC and SNAP recipients and the general public through research, capacity building, and dissemination.

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Choosing Foods and Beverages to Promote in Healthy Retail Research

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Purchasing a healthy mix of food items is a key step toward improving diet and health. Researchers are increasingly focusing on this step, investigating strategies to promote healthy food purchasing. However, in a retail setting that encompasses thousands of items, choosing products to promote that are most likely to have a positive impact on consumers' diets may require consideration. The purpose of this brief is to provide behavioral researchers with a quick reference to help determine which types of products to promote.

2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans— Federal Guidance on Food Choice

Since 1980, the Federal government has published the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#),¹ which offers specific information about the amounts and types of foods and specific nutrients an average, healthy person should consume daily. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans promote a healthy eating pattern that includes a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, fat-free or low-fat dairy, protein foods, and oils. In addition, the guidelines limit saturated and *trans* fats, added sugars, and sodium. This guidance is revised every 5 years based on the current nutritional research and guides federal nutrition policy and programs. For example, it is the basis for nutrition labeling of packaged foods, MyPlate and other Federal nutrition education materials, and USDA's SNAP-Ed program, which conducts nutrition education programming for low-income Americans.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans provides advice about the types and amounts of foods to eat to be healthy. Accompanying this, USDA provides food buying guides that suggest how food budgets should be spent to obtain the right mix of healthy foods to eat. Comparing plan recommendations to how a national panel of American consumers actually spent their food dollars demonstrated dramatic differences (Figure).²

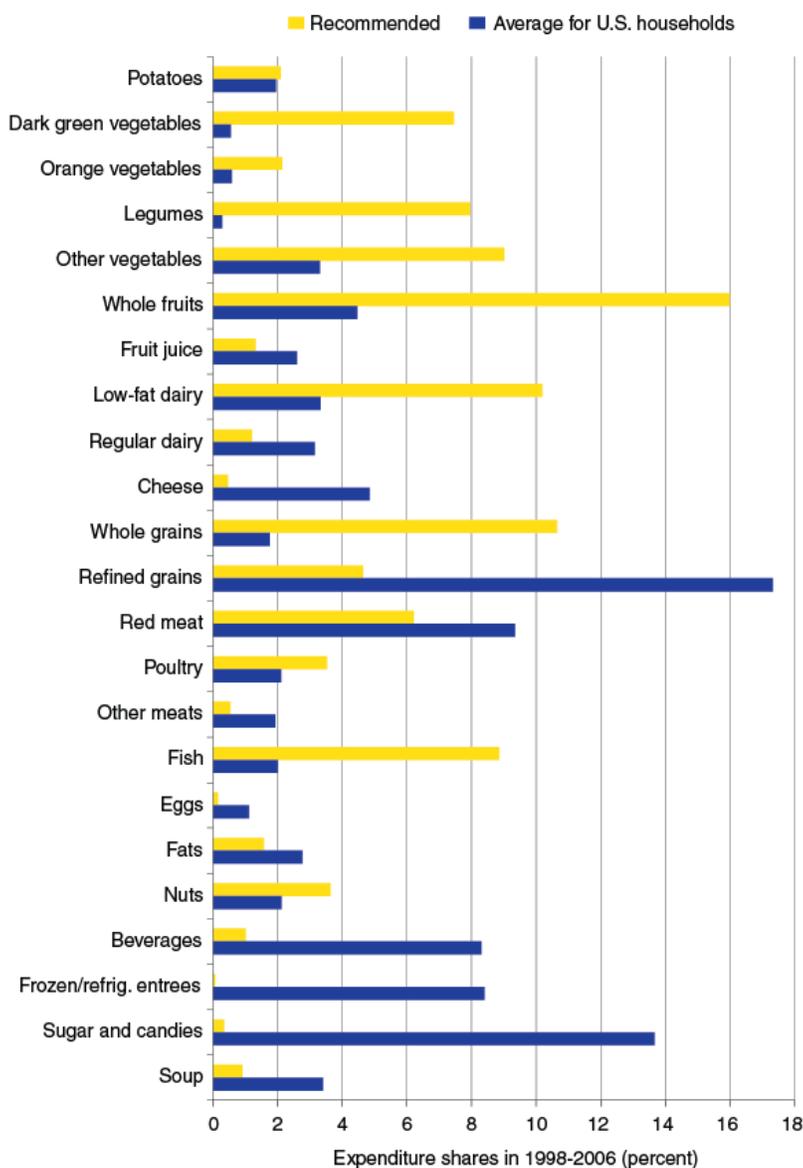
Consumers underspent on all categories of vegetables except potatoes; whole fruits; whole grains; and low-fat dairy, while overspending on several less-nutritious categories. For example, they spent 0.5% of their food budget on dark green vegetables, compared to a recommended 7%, demonstrating the potential impact of effective strategies to shift purchasing in the desired direction.

When Cost Is Also a Factor

For many consumers, price is a strong concern. In 2015, more than 45 million Americans obtained food purchasing benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).³ Researchers with an interest in retail interventions focused on low-income consumers must take into account their tight budget constraints in selecting products to promote. USDA's Thrifty Food Plan is a guide to purchasing healthy foods within such constraints.⁴ Table 1 gives examples of healthy items to promote that would meet these requirements. More recommendations are available from the Healthy Eating Research Program's report on *Minimum Stocking Levels and Marketing Strategies of Healthful Foods for Small Retail Food Stores*.⁵

To achieve nutrition goals while keeping costs low, the Thrifty Food Plan emphasizes using basic food staples that may take more time or skill to prepare. For low-income families juggling multiple constraints, this may pose challenges,^{6,7} and strategies that take this into consideration may have

At-home spending patterns of U.S. households are not in sync with USDA food plan recommendations



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service calculations using Nielsen Homescan data and USDA, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion's Liberal food plan.

more chance of success. USDA's [SNAP-Ed program](#), funded at more than \$400 million in 2016, aims to help SNAP participants and other low-income individuals make both healthy and economical food choices. SNAP-Ed can include healthy retail activities in stores that serve appreciable numbers of low-income consumers. SNAP-Ed is required to use evidence-based approaches, creating a need for research to identify effective strategies in the retail sphere.⁸

Table 1. Examples of Foods to Promote in SNAP-Ed Retail Interventions

Food Group	Key Recommendations	Examples of Lower-Cost Foods to Promote
Fruits	Focus on whole fruits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh fruits that are in season • Frozen fruits with no added sugar • Canned fruit packed in water or 100% juice • Dried fruits, such as raisins
Vegetables	Vary your veggies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh vegetables that are in season • Low sodium or no salt added canned vegetables • Plain frozen vegetables without added salt or fat
Grains	Make half your grains whole grains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole grain breads • Brown rice • Oats
Protein	Vary your protein routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dried or low sodium or no salt added canned beans and peas • Canned tuna packed in water • Eggs • Peanut butter
Dairy	Move to low-fat or fat-free milk or yogurt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-fat or fat-free milk • Low-fat or fat-free yogurt • Calcium-fortified soy beverages (soymilk)

Fine-Tuning Food Choices

Choosing very simple items like fresh produce as the focus for an intervention can be straightforward, but what about packaged items? Canned or frozen vegetables or other foods can be more convenient, but it is important to be sure that the overall nutrition profile of the item meets nutrition standards for your intervention. Because even simple items can vary widely in added sodium, fat, or sugars content across brands, evaluating nutrient content of items to be promoted using nutrition labeling (Nutrition Facts panel) and objective criteria can be helpful. An example is choosing snack items to be promoted using USDA's Smart Snack Standards, as shown on the following page.

Smart Snack Standards

When selecting appropriate snack foods to promote, one may consider the USDA's [Smart Snack Standards](#), which focus on limiting calories, sodium, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and sugars as shown in *Table 2*. It is important to note that the USDA does not promote specific product brands—only nutritional content. A list of products that meet these standards are available within the [Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Smart Food Planner](#).⁹

Table 2. Smart Snack Standards

Nutrient	Snack	Entree
Calories	200 calories or less	350 calories or less
Total Fat	35% of calories or less	35% of calories or less
Trans Fat	0 g	0 g
Sodium	200 mg or less	480 mg or less
Saturated Fat	Less than 10% of calories	Less than 10% of calories
Sugar	35% by weight or less	35% by weight or less

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