

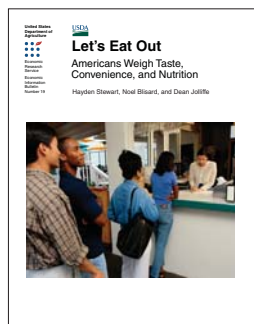
ERS *Report Summary*

Diet and Health

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Let's Eat Out Americans Weigh Taste, Convenience, and Nutrition

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Whether eating out or buying carry-out, Americans are consuming more and more of their calories from full-service and fast-food restaurants. The share of daily caloric intake from food eaten away from home increased from 18 percent to 32 percent between the late 1970s and the middle 1990s, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food-intake surveys (1977-78 and 1994-96). However, these foods tend to be more calorie dense and nutritionally poorer than foods prepared at home, on average.

What Is the Issue?

When making choices about where and how often to eat out, do U.S. consumers want healthful foods, and do they apply any knowledge of health and nutrition to their choices?

What Did the Study Find?

The answer to both questions: a qualified yes. The desire for health is one of several determinants of consumer behavior. Consumers also weigh the convenience and entertainment value of a dining experience as they apply differing amounts of diet-health knowledge.

A survey of U.S. consumers indicates that respondents who are more willing to trade off other attributes of food for convenience are about 8 percent more likely to dine out at least every few days. When convenience is a main factor influencing away-from-home food choices, consumers are 17 percent more likely to purchase fast food.

As to full-service restaurants, consumers seeking an enjoyable dining experience are 29 percent more likely to patronize this sort of eating place. Consumers who are looking for healthful foods are also 19 percent more likely to patronize full-service restaurants than they are to pick fast-food outlets. These latter consumers, who generally avoid fast-food fare, may believe that full-service establishments provide relatively healthful foods.

In fact, other research shows that meals and snacks consumed at full-service restaurants are not nutritionally superior to fast food. Compared with fast-food meals, full-service meals tend to be higher in fat, cholesterol, and sodium, on average, while lower in saturated fats. This gap in diet-health knowledge may be an instance where consumers could benefit from additional nutrition education. Results show that having more advanced diet-health knowledge, as evidenced by a greater understanding of diet-disease relationships, increases the likelihood that a consumer patronizes fast-food outlets.

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The trend toward increased consumption of food away from home has been attributed to growing consumer demand for a variety of foods, convenience, and entertainment. However, the lower nutritional quality of food away from home does not itself suggest that consumers desire unhealthful foods nor does it suggest that consumers fail to use their knowledge of health and diet when making dining-out decisions. Restaurants may be able to sell foods of lower dietary quality than home-cooked foods, on average, because patrons desire the other attributes of restaurant meals and snacks. Some consumers may also make decisions based on partial information.

How Was the Study Conducted?

A 2002 survey of 700 New Jersey consumers provides the basis for this study. The survey collected the following data about consumers:

- income and demographic characteristics
- preferences for the healthfulness, convenience, and enjoyment value of food, in general, as well as for restaurant foods, in particular
- knowledge of the relationship between diet and selected diseases, our proxy for overall diet-health knowledge
- behavior in the away-from-home-food market.

Statistical techniques were used to separate the effects of income and demographics from the effects of preferences and knowledge.