New research shows eating for health and sustainability is cheaper for the household budget (and better for the planet) - Media release

New research on household family shopping baskets from the University of Wollongong has confirmed that eating a diet based on whole and fresh foods is still the cheapest option for most Australian families – despite CPI price hikes.

“While we have experienced a major fresh produce price crisis this year, it is heartening to see in this data that the average cost of eating a diet rich in seasonal fruit and vegetables is still the most affordable option in this country,” Dietitians Australia CEO Robert Hunt said.

“Individuals can’t go at this alone, we are lobbying hard for system-wide reform through the development of a National Nutrition Policy,” he said.

“This new research does provide some relief, that getting adequate fruit and vegetable intake could actually result in significant savings to the family budget if done well,” he said.

Professor Karen Charlton, Accredited Practising Dietitian and leading researcher in sustainable diets says the research conducted at the University of Wollongong in May 2022 found the following:

- Current diets are significantly more expensive than eating a nutritious and healthy diet
- The average saving of a healthy diet ranges from $63 up to $78 per week*
- The data suggests low-income households spend some 33% of their income on food, this percentage could be reduced to 27% when eating a healthy diet
- Spending 30% of household income on food places families in financial stress

The latest data from the Illawarra was prepared using the ASAP tool developed by Professor Amanda Lee of the University of Queensland** and supports what has been found in the largest global study of sustainable eating- Eat Lancet.

“What we eat has a significant impact on the environment, and when poor choices are made around discretionary foods (which is often influenced by advertising) – this has a significant impact on our health too,” Professor Charlton said.

“Packaged and ultra-processed foods offer next to no nutritional value for us and contribute in volumes to global landfill.

“To feed a growing population and preserve fragile ecosystems, we need to be eating smarter,” Professor Charlton said.

“A healthy and sustainable diet must be nutritionally adequate, have a low environmental impact, be culturally acceptable, accessible, fair and affordable,” Professor Charlton said.

The study was based on the Eat Lancet diet principles, better known as the planetary health diet.

Symbolically it is represented by half a plate of fruits, vegetables, and nuts.

The other half consists of primarily whole grains, plant proteins (beans, lentils, pulses), unsaturated plant oils, modest amounts of meat and dairy and some added sugars and starchy vegetables.

The diet is quite flexible and allows for adaptation to dietary needs, personal preferences and cultural traditions.

10 steps Australians can take towards sustainable eating at home now:

- Avoid food waste: plan meals and use up leftovers

- Choose a mostly plant-based diet that is fresh and minimally processed.
- Eat only the recommended amounts of animal foods
- Embrace the nutrition nestled in tin cans -use legumes such as lentils, chickpeas or kidney beans to replace some or part of the meat in recipes.
- Plan for the week, write a shopping list and aim to shop for only what you need.
- Eat seasonal, local foods where possible- choosing things in season is often cheaper.
- Cook and share meals with others
- Try something new. Individuals need to move out of their comfort zones, and find cheaper, seasonal sustainable alternatives in the supermarkets when they can't afford or find their usual.
- Keep frozen foods on hand for when seasonal fresh produce is unavailable, when stored properly, they are just as nutritious
- Choose tap water as your preferred drink

The new research has been released following the close of the Dietitians Australia Conference the largest annual gathering of thought leaders in diet and nutrition in the country, where there was a strong focus on how accredited practising dietitians can help nurture the uptake of sustainable diets.

Further information

Read Dietitians Australia's full position statement on Sustainable Diets.

⁎Dependant on postcodes within the survey set.

⁎⁎ Healthy Diets ASAP protocol developed by Professor Amanda Lee of University of Queensland has been used by many different groups, in seven locations around the country. This Media Release reports the latest survey, from the Illawarra region of NSW.

(NOTE) Healthy, sustainable, equitable diets have been found to be far less affordable in remote areas, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, than in other areas.

Media interviews

Robert Hunt CEO of Dietitians Australia is available via phone and Zoom (Canberra based)

Professor Karen Charlton - pre-recorded radio grabs can be downloaded here.