

Want to better comply with dietary guidelines, and save money? Cook dinner at home

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Credit: Oregon State University

The best culinary paths to better health are not always paved with cash, new research shows, and cooking at home can provide the best bang-for-

the-buck nutritionally as well as financially.

A study by Arpita Tiwari, a health systems researcher at Oregon State University, and collaborators at the University of Washington confirms what many mothers and grandmothers have said for decades: that habitually eating dinner at [home](#) means a better diet and lower food expenditures compared with regularly dining out.

"Traditionally better [socioeconomic status](#) - more money - means healthier people," Tiwari said. "That's the trend. This research goes against that; it shows a resilience to that trend. It's not spending more but how you spend that's important. What you eat is important."

"Cooking at home reduces that expenditure, and our research empirically quantifies that when we regularly eat dinner at home, our nutrition intake is better."

Tiwari is quick to point out, though, that researchers understand the barriers to home-cooked meals.

"A mother who has two jobs and four children, even if she knows the value of home-cooked dinners, doesn't have time to cook," Tiwari said. "Government policy needs to be mindful of things like that when states create programs to help Medicaid populations achieve nutritional goals. Right now our system really does not allow for it. What can the government do about that? That's what needs to be explored in the near future."

The research involved more than 400 Seattle-area adults who were surveyed regarding a week's worth of cooking and eating behaviors. Participants also provided various types of sociodemographic information, and their weekly food intake was graded using the Healthy Eating Index (HEI).

HEI scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating better diet quality. An index score over 81 indicates a "good" diet; 51 to 80 means "needs improvement"; and 50 or less is "poor."

Households that cooked at home three times per week showed an average score of about 67 on the Healthy Eating Index; cooking at home six times per week resulted in an average score of around 74.

"Higher HEI scores are generally associated with higher socioeconomic status, education and income," Tiwari said. "By contrast, cooking dinner at home depends more on the number of children at home. The study showed no association between income or education and eating at home or eating out."

The findings also suggested that regularly eating home-cooked dinners, associated with diets lower in calories, sugar and fat, meant meeting more of the [guidelines](#) for a healthy diet as determined by the Department of Agriculture.

Eighty percent of U.S. residents fail to meet at least some of the federal dietary guidelines, the study notes, and about half the money spent on eating in the U.S. is on food not cooked at home. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, the percentage of home-cooked calories consumed fell from 82 to 68.

"HMOs should have ancillary programs to really encourage people to eat healthier," Tiwari said. "It's a benefit for insurance companies to get involved; eating is really the source of most of the issues that the insurance system has to deal with down the road."

More information: Arpita Tiwari et al, Cooking at Home: A Strategy to Comply With U.S. Dietary Guidelines at No Extra Cost, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2017). [DOI](#):

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