



Consumer Focus

► compiled by **Linda Robbins**, assistant editor

Americans are getting healthier

USDA research shows improvements in diet quality between 2005 and 2010.

Government report

American adults are eating better, making better use of available nutrition information, consuming fewer calories from fat and saturated fat, consuming less cholesterol, and eating more fiber, according to a new report from the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) titled *Changes in Eating Patterns and Diet Quality Among Working-Age Adults, 2005-2010*.

The study, released Jan. 16, underscores the importance of robust efforts undertaken since 2009 to improve food choices and diet quality, and to ensure that all Americans have access to healthy food and science-based nutrition education and advice.

The researchers found that use of nutrition information, including the Nutrition Facts Panel found on most food

packages, increased in recent years. Forty-two percent of working-age adults and 57% of older adults reported using the Nutrition Facts Panel most or all of the time when making food choices. When asked about nutrition information in restaurants, 76% of working-age adults reported that they would use the information if it were available.

“We are pleased to hear that this study finds improvements in several key areas of the American diet,” said Michael Taylor, deputy commissioner for foods and veterinary medicine at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). “FDA will soon propose an updated Nutrition Facts label designed to provide information that will make it even easier for people to make healthy choices.”

Reduced consumption of food away from home (such as food from restaurants and fast food) accounted for 20% of the improvements in diet quality. A recent study found that during the recession of 2007-2009, U.S. household overall food expenditures declined approximately 5%, mostly due to a 12.9% decline in spending on food away from home. Calories consumed through food away from home dropped by 127 calories per day,

and the average person ate three fewer meals and 1.5 fewer snacks per month away from home. Eating at home more often was also associated with more frequent family meals.

The report also indicates changing attitudes toward food and nutrition. Compared with 2007, the percentage of working-age adults who believed they have the ability to change their body weight increased by three percentage points in 2010.

During the same time period, the report shows there was little change in the importance that price played when making choices at the grocery store, but working-age adults placed increased importance on nutrition when choosing items to purchase.

“When individuals believe that their actions directly affect their body weight, they might be more inclined to make

healthier food choices,” said study author Jessica Todd of the ERS.

The researchers used individual dietary intake data for working-age adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), which collects detailed individual and household information on a wide range of health-related topics through questionnaires, physical exams and lab work, in two-year segments.

The survey is designed to be nationally representative, with a sample composed of 9,839 individuals. Overall, daily caloric intake declined by 78 calories per day between 2005 and 2010. There were overall declines in calories from total fat (3.3%), saturated fat (5.9%) and intake of cholesterol (7.9%). Overall fiber intake increased by 1.2 grams per day (7.5%).

This research was conducted by the ERS, which is a primary source of economic information and research at USDA.

Obesity rates

In the 2013 report *F as in Fat*, jointly released by the Trust for America's Health (TFAH) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), it was revealed that after

three decades of increases, adult obesity rates remained level in every state but one, Arkansas.


Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and CEO of the RWJF, and Jeffrey Levi, executive director of TFAH, admitted in their letter on the TFAH website that they considered renaming the report *F as in Forward* because they think lasting progress is being made. They emphasized the existing rates are still very high and put Americans at risk for health problems while adding to national health-care costs.

According to the report, 13 states currently have obesity rates topping 30%, 41 states have rates above 25% and every state is above 20%. For the first time in eight years, Mississippi no longer has the highest rate. At 34.7%, Louisiana is the highest, followed closely by Mississippi at 34.6%. Colorado had the lowest rate at 20.5%. Obesity rates vary by age, education, income and racial/ethnic group.

More than two-thirds (68.7%) of American adults are either overweight or obese. In the past 30 years, adult obesity rates have more than doubled, from 15% in 1976-1980 to 35.7% in 2009-2010. According to the report, the average American adult is more than 24 pounds (lb.) heavier today than in 1960. Ten years ago, the obesity rate for women was significantly higher than the rate for men — 33.4% compared with 27.5%, respectively. Currently, the obesity percentages for men (35.8%) and women (35.5%) are essentially the same.

The number of extremely obese adults has grown significantly over time. The National Center for Health Statistics reported in September 2012 that the rate of extremely obese adults grew from 1.4% between 1976 and 1980 to 6.3% during 2009-2010. An individual is considered extremely obese if his or her body mass index (BMI) is greater than or equal to 40, which is roughly the equivalent of being 100 lb. or more above ideal body weight.

Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that rates of childhood obesity have remained statistically the same for the past 10 years, with the exception of the prevalence of obesity among boys (2 to 19 years old), which increased from 14% in 1999-2000 to 18.6% in 2009-2010, according to *F as in Fat*.

Rates of obesity among children ages 2 to 19 are still far too high — more than triple what they were in 1980, according to both CDC and *F as in Fat* reports. According to the most recent NHAES, 16.9% of children ages 2 to 19 are obese and 31.7% are overweight or obese. This translates to more than 12 million children and adolescents who are obese, and more than 23 million who are either obese or overweight. 

Reduced consumption of food away from home accounted for 20% of the improvements in diet quality.