

# Food Unit Communiqué

**SUBJECT: FOOD ACCESS AND COSTS SURVEY**

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## Introduction

Food has a direct influence on health and the prevention of non-communicable disease through improving nutrition is a public health priority. Consumption of nutritious, safe and appropriate foods leads to a well nourished and healthy society. Food security, the ability of individuals, households and communities to acquire appropriate and nutritious food on a regular and reliable basis using socially acceptable means, is determined by people's local 'food supply' and their capacity and resources to 'access and use that food'. The availability and affordability of food is a determinant of food choice. The Department of Health (DOH), in partnership with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Curtin University, developed and managed the implementation of the Food Access and Costs Survey (FACS).

## Objectives

The FACS aimed to explore cost and availability as determinants of food choice in Western Australia (WA) and the feasibility for the development of a nationally harmonised system for monitoring food access and cost. The survey focused on the food supply aspect of food security, particularly cost, variety, quality and availability.

## Implementing the survey

Prior to the FACS survey, little was known about the geographic location of grocery stores and the affordability and quality of food available in WA. The survey was conducted in August/September 2010. A representative sample of 160 grocery stores in Western Australia including all community stores was selected. The survey response rate was 90%.

Ninety seven individual surveyors including, local government Environmental Health Officers, Public Health Nutritionists and students on university placement, as well as staff from the DOH's Environmental Health Directorate and Curtin University implemented the surveys across the state. The average time to complete the survey was 4.1 hours. Time varied according to the size of store and whether or not pricing labels were on food. Smaller stores took less time.

At the time of the survey we were unable to obtain information about the 25 top food selling products. This information would be useful to inform nutrition interventions.

## Key findings

### **1. WA Grocery stores location is associated with population density**

There were 447 grocery stores across WA at the time of the survey, 85 Coles, 84 Woolworths, 226 IGA and 52 community stores. Coles and Woolworths are mainly located in population dense areas. IGA stores are the main providers of foods to regional and remote areas, however, in very remote areas of WA, people rely on one main grocery store, usually a community store. See Figure 1.

### **2. Energy density foods are cheaper than less energy dense foods**

Foods that are higher in kilojoules generally cost less than those that are not. There is a strong correlation between the cost of foods and their energy density. Generally, fats and oils, sugar and foods that are high in added fat and sugar were the cheapest. Perishable core foods (e.g. fruit, vegetables, meats and dairy foods) that are lower energy density and higher nutrient density cost more by weight than those of a higher energy density.

### **3. Food costs substantially more in remote areas of WA**

The cost of all food groups was significantly greater in very remote areas than in Perth. The mean cost per fortnight for a healthy food basket in WA in August/September 2010 was \$542.19 to \$627.11 per fortnight. Remote communities would pay significantly more for a healthy food basket compared to the major city. The cost of an average basket was 23.5 percent more expensive in very remote areas at up to \$709.04.

### **4. Welfare recipients spend a greater proportion of their income on food**

The proportion of weekly income that would be spent on food to purchase a food basket consistent with Australian Dietary Guidelines was much greater for welfare recipients. Welfare recipients would need to allocate approximately half of their disposable income to food compared to only 16 percent for the average income earner.

### **5. Access to fresh, good quality food is limited by where people live**

As well as costing more, the range and quality of foods that were available decreased with distance from Perth. The quality of fresh foods (i.e. fresh meat, fruit and vegetables) was impacted by transport logistics. Fresh food is limited in its availability outside the Perth metropolitan area. Meat was only available frozen and milk was only available in UHT or powdered forms in many regional and remote areas.

## Conclusion

People living in remote areas of WA are at a disadvantage when it comes to affordability and access to healthy food. Food pricing is associated with geographic location, with remote areas paying more for all foods. This increase is across all foods, however, greater for healthier foods, for example fruit (32%), vegetables (26%) and dairy (40%).

Monitoring food prices provides evidence to support intervention development aimed at increasing the promotion, sale and consumption of foods consistent with dietary recommendations. Further analysis is recommended to explore the cost of an optimum food basket, and the comparative cost of 'junk food' compared to core foods.

The food pricing and quality survey is likely to be useful for nutrition promotion purposes, however further research, information and partnerships are required to achieve this end. In particular, negotiation with the grocery retail industry is required to identify how access and pricing influences the food choice in relation to the promotion, pricing and quality of foods

## Recommendations

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  1. Conduct an annual WA Food Access and Pricing Survey
  2. Develop a national routine food access and pricing survey to support policy initiatives to promote food security.
  3. Formalise partnerships between government agencies, food industry, and appropriate academic institutions to explore the influence of food access and pricing on health.
  4. Negotiate to identify the top 25 best selling foods to inform the development of nutrition interventions.
  5. Continue to develop and refine the objective assessment of quality and availability of fresh food at point of sale.
  6. Develop and refine a series of food baskets to represent optimal and current consumption.

## Acknowledgements

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We especially thank all the surveyors including: Environmental Health Officers and others from local government, staff from Country Health Services (mostly public health nutritionists), tertiary students on placement who were coopted to assist, Curtin University and Environmental Health Directorate staff.

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Figure 1: Supermarket locations, WA

