

Supplementing financial aid with education may benefit SNAP recipients

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Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have been boosting food security for Americans in need for decades. New research suggests that pairing education with this financial

assistance could help to improve diet quality, as well.

The study, led by a team including Penn State researchers and recently published in the journal [Agricultural Economics](#), used nationally representative data on household food purchases to study the effects of SNAP participation on diet quality.

The researchers found that, on average, SNAP participation did not have an effect on households' diet quality. However, participation was associated with a 17% diet quality reduction in households that started with low-to-intermediate diet quality scores before receiving SNAP benefits.

Linlin Fan, assistant professor of [agricultural economics](#) in the College of Agricultural Sciences and corresponding author on the study, said the findings could help identify the households that might benefit the most from educational programs focused on helping participants make healthier food choices.

"Policymakers have become motivated in recent years to improve the quality of diets among SNAP participants, given the increasing prevalence of diet-related chronic disease, obesity and diabetes," Fan said. "We found that the negative effects of SNAP on diet quality for some but not all participants were primarily driven by a higher acquisition of empty calories, suggesting opportunities for education about making healthful nutritional choices."

In 2008, the Food Stamp Program was renamed as SNAP, signaling an expansion of the program's goals to include improving dietary quality in addition to its original goal of reducing [food insecurity](#). It's the U.S.'s largest food and nutrition assistance program, with more than 40 million Americans enrolled in the program in 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

While some previous studies have found small average effects of SNAP on dietary quality, the researchers said exactly what these effects are, and which households are more likely to see these effects has remained unclear.

"By helping to alleviate budget constraints, receiving SNAP benefits could lead families to increase their consumption of both healthy and unhealthy food," Fan said. "Some households may increase their dietary quality while others may lower it, so we wanted to delve deeper into how receiving SNAP benefits are fueling these food choices."

For the study, the researchers used data from the USDA's Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey, a nationally representative dataset that captured detailed information about purchases and acquisitions of food items intended for at-home and away-from-home consumption.

Data were collected from 4,826 households during a one-week survey period, and included information on the prices, quantities and nutrient characteristics of food items. Data were also collected on household participation in different nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; School Breakfast Program; and the National School Lunch Program.

Fan explained that because the survey only provided information about food purchases and not actual intake, the data reflected the healthfulness of each household's food choices—which [previous work](#) has shown to be a good indicator of overall diet quality.

Diet quality was measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Healthy Eating Index (HEI), which measures how well a set of foods aligns with the dietary guidelines as set by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services.

For most households, the researchers found that SNAP participation had no significant impact on diet quality. However, SNAP participation had significant, negative impacts in households with diet quality scores in the 30 to 50th percentile. In these households, SNAP participation reduces their HEI scores by over 17% or more than 7 points out of a total score of 100.

While other factors such as taste preference, convenience, ability to cook and access to healthy food such as produce may also influence diet quality, the researchers said their results indicate that nutritional education in addition to the monetary support provided by SNAP may benefit the households with poorer [diet quality](#).

"Our finding that SNAP has no average effect on overall dietary quality suggests a need for nutritional education in addition to monetary support," Fan said. "Factors such as preferences for [healthy food](#), valuation of taste and convenience, mastery of cooking skills and facilities, and accessibility to healthy and nutritious food may also play important roles in household dietary quality."

More information: Jinglin Feng et al, The distributional impact of SNAP on dietary quality, *Agricultural Economics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/agec.12808](#)

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