

WHEN CHEAP COSTS MORE: THE HIDDEN CYCLE OF JUNK FOOD, HEALTH, AND INEQUALITY

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In a world of abundant food, a silent, pervasive paradox is shaping the health and quality of life for billions. For many, the choice between a nourishing, healthy meal and a quick, inexpensive one is not a matter of willpower, but of basic economics. All too often, junk food and ultra-processed items are not just convenient; they are the most affordable and accessible options, trapping individuals and communities in a cycle of poor health.

This global affordability gap, where unhealthy food is cheaper than healthy food, has profound consequences, fuelling a rise in diet-related diseases and exacerbating health disparities. It's a systemic issue with a staggering human cost, and it demands our urgent attention.

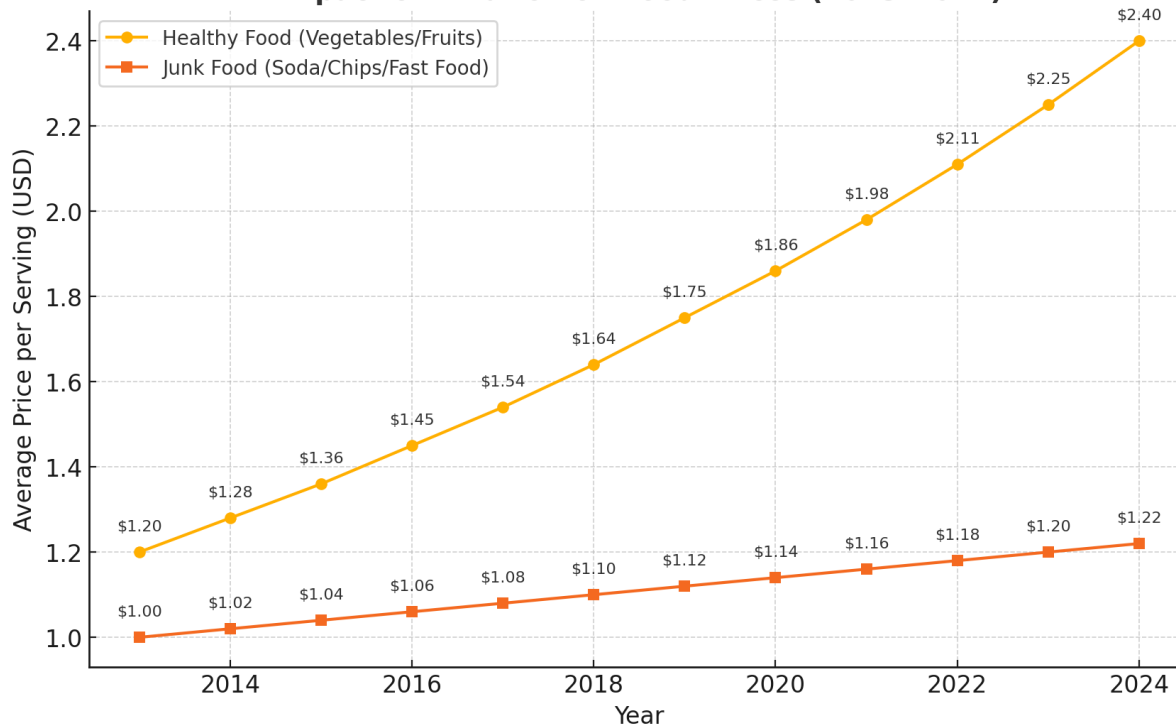
The Price Tag of Health: A Global Affordability Gap

The notion that healthy eating is a luxury is more than just a feeling—it's a stark global reality. Numerous studies confirm that nutritious diets are consistently more expensive than their unhealthy counterparts. A 2014 meta-analysis published in the journal *BMJ Open* found that **healthier diets cost, on average, approximately \$1.50 more per person per day** than less healthy diets. While this may seem insignificant, it adds up to over \$550 annually per person, a significant burden for low-income households.

Recent trends have only worsened this disparity. Data from a 2022 study in the journal *Nutrients* highlighted that in Australia, the cost of healthy food increased at nearly double the rate of unhealthy food between 2021 and 2022. This widening gap is not an isolated event. According to data from Statista, vegetables can be up to **9 times** more expensive per calorie than starchy food staples, while ultra-processed foods and confectionery items are only about **2.8 times** more expensive. This makes calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods a far more economical choice for those on a tight budget.

A 2021 report from the World Bank and FAO, using the Cost and Affordability of a Healthy Diet (CoAHD) metric, revealed the scale of the problem. Globally, a healthy diet cost an average of **\$3.68 per person per day**, far exceeding the international extreme poverty line of \$2.15. The report concluded that **2.8 billion people worldwide cannot afford a healthy diet**, a number that has been increasing. This finding illustrates a powerful correlation: when incomes are low, the ability to afford a healthy diet diminishes, pushing people towards cheaper, less nutritious options.

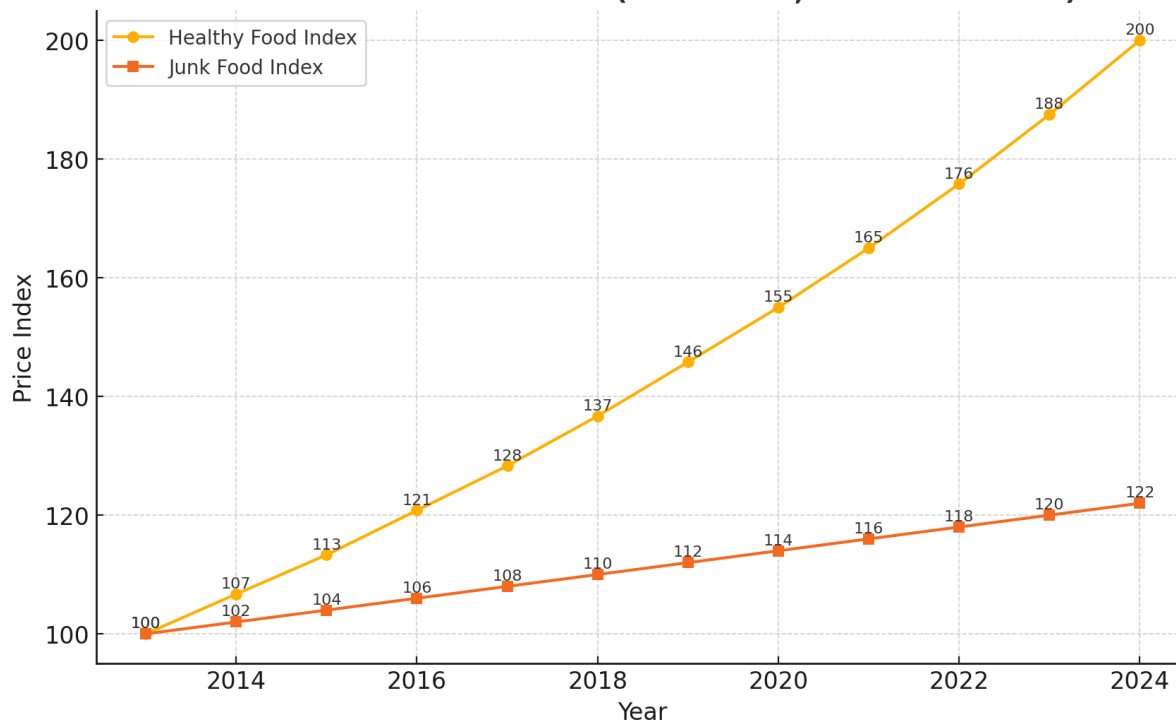
Impact of Inflation on Food Prices (2013-2024)



Source: USDA ERS, BLS CPI, Harvard School of Public Health, WHO (illustrative projections based on historical trends).

Over the past decade, the price of healthy food has more than doubled, while junk food prices have remained nearly flat. By 2024, a serving of vegetables or fruit costs over twice as much as a serving of soda or chips, widening the affordability gap

Food Price Inflation Index (2013-2024, Base Year = 100)



Source: USDA ERS, BLS CPI, Harvard School of Public Health, WHO (illustrative projections based on historical trends).

When indexed to 2013 = 100, healthy food prices surged to over 200 by 2024, while junk food only reached 127. This means nutritious foods are inflating at **over four times the rate** of junk foods, making healthy diets increasingly out of reach.

So why are fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins more expensive? The reasons are complex and multifaceted:

- **Production and Perishability:** Healthy foods, particularly fresh produce, are often more expensive to produce, transport, and store due to their shorter shelf life. This leads to higher waste and costs passed on to the consumer.
- **Agricultural Subsidies:** Many governments provide subsidies to farmers who grow staple crops like corn, wheat, and soy. These crops are the primary ingredients in ultra-processed foods, making them artificially cheap to produce and sell.
- **Economies of Scale:** The processed food industry operates on massive economies of scale. They can produce, package, and distribute vast quantities of products at a very low cost per unit, a luxury not available to the producers of fresh, whole foods.
- **Labor Costs:** Growing and harvesting fresh produce is often more labor-intensive than processing foods in a factory, further increasing the cost of healthy options.

The Silent Epidemic: Unhealthy Diets and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

The consequences of this affordability gap are devastating. Unhealthy diets are a leading risk factor for Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), which are responsible for 73% of global deaths, with a disproportionate impact on low- and middle-income countries. The link between ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and NCDs is particularly strong, as these items are often high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats.

Research has quantified the direct link between unhealthy food consumption and the rise of these diseases. The table below outlines the relationship between specific dietary risks and their contribution to the global disease burden.

Dietary Risks and Their Contribution to Global Disease

Dietary Risk	Impact on Health
Processed Meat	A daily intake of 50g is associated with a 26% increased risk of colorectal cancer and a 30% increased risk of type 2 diabetes.
Sugar-Sweetened Beverages	Consuming 250g daily is associated with a 20% increased risk of type 2 diabetes and a 7% increased risk of coronary heart disease.
Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs)	High consumption is linked to a 25-58% higher risk of cardiometabolic outcomes and a 21-66% higher risk of all-cause mortality.
Junk Food	A meta-analysis published in PubMed found that high consumption is linked to 15% increased odds of stress and depression and 16% increased odds of mental health problems.

Source: The BMJ, PubMed, World Cancer Research Fund, American Heart Association, Global Burden of Disease

Beyond the physical diseases, the consumption of junk food also takes a toll on mental health and overall quality of life. The short-term effects include fatigue, difficulty sleeping, and poor concentration, while long-term consumption is linked to depression and anxiety. For many, this cycle of poor nutrition and compromised health limits their ability to work, socialize, and thrive, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and poor well-being.

Global Best Practices to Promote Healthy Diets

Recognizing the severity of this issue, many countries are implementing innovative policies to address the food affordability and health crisis. These initiatives focus on making healthy options more accessible and discouraging the consumption of unhealthy ones. The table below highlights some of the best practices from around the world.

Country/Region	Policy/Intervention Type	Impact	Main Beneficiaries
Mexico, Chile, UK, Portugal, South Africa	Sugar-Sweetened Beverage (SSB) Taxes	Reduced purchases of sugary drinks (e.g., Mexico saw a 12% drop in the first year). This nudges consumers toward healthier alternatives like water and helps lower overall sugar intake, which is a major contributor to obesity and type 2 diabetes.	General population with stronger impact on low-income individuals who are more price sensitive.
United States, United Kingdom	Fruit/Vegetable Subsidies & Vouchers	Increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables among low-income households. Programs like the US's Double Up Food Bucks, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) match spending, effectively making healthy food more affordable and improving dietary quality for families in need.	Low-income families, pregnant women, and young children.
Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Thailand, Israel	Front-of-Package Warning Labels	Helped consumers make informed choices by clearly identifying products high in sugar, salt, and fat with black warning labels. This has led to a shift in purchases away from these unhealthy items and encouraged manufacturers to reformulate products.	All consumers, with a particular benefit to parents and children who are the target of junk food advertising.
Finland, United Kingdom, South Africa	Mandatory Salt and Trans-Fat Reduction	Achieved population-wide sodium reduction, leading to significant declines in blood pressure and a reduction in cardiovascular disease (CVD) events. Finland's program is a landmark example, with an 80% drop in salt intake over a few decades.	The general population, particularly those at risk for heart disease and high blood pressure.
Brazil, United States, France	School Food Programs	Improved diet quality for students by providing nutritious, balanced meals and restricting the sale of junk food on school grounds. In Brazil, the program even links with local family farms, which benefits both student health and the local economy.	School-age children, especially those from low-income households who rely on school meals for a significant portion of their daily nutrition.
Latvia, Ireland, Malta	Fiscal Rebalancing (Lower VAT on healthy foods)	Modest but measurable increases in fruit and vegetable consumption by making them more affordable. When paired with taxes on unhealthy foods, this strategy provides a dual incentive for both consumers and food producers.	The general population, as it lowers the price barrier for healthy eating.

The policies listed in the table are most effective when they're not used in isolation. The most successful examples show that a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach is key to achieving significant improvements in population health over time.

- Taxes and subsidies create a fiscal one-two punch.** Taxes on unhealthy items directly curb demand by making them less affordable. This revenue can then be reinvested into public health initiatives, such as funding healthy food subsidies and school nutrition programs. At the same time, targeted subsidies make healthy choices more affordable at the point of purchase, which is crucial for vulnerable groups where cost is the biggest barrier. This is a deliberate strategy of "fiscal rebalancing."
- Regulations change the food environment.** Labeling and marketing restrictions make it easier for consumers to make healthy decisions. Front-of-package warning labels cut through the noise of advertising, while restrictions on marketing to children protect a vulnerable audience. Similarly, government-mandated reformulation of products (e.g., reducing salt or trans-fats) improves the nutritional quality of the food supply itself, benefiting the entire population without requiring individual behavior change.
- School programs build healthy habits early.** Nutritious school meals and restrictions on junk food in schools are vital for children. These programs ensure that, regardless of a child's socioeconomic background, they have access to a healthy meal. This also serves as a critical buffer against aggressive marketing and anchors healthy habits that can last a lifetime.

By combining these different approaches, countries can create a food system that supports public health rather than undermining it. Instead of relying on a single policy to fix a complex problem, these countries show that a holistic, integrated strategy is the most powerful tool for improving national well-being.

Conclusion: Towards a Healthier and More Equitable Food Future

The evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that unhealthy and junk foods are not only more affordable than healthy alternatives but that this price disparity is widening. This economic reality creates a significant barrier to nutritious eating for billions globally, particularly for low-income populations who bear a disproportionate burden of diet-related diseases. The pervasive affordability of ultra-processed foods, coupled with their detrimental impact on physical and mental health, contributes significantly to the global epidemic of Non-Communicable Diseases. The transformation of global food systems towards cheaper, highly processed options is a fundamental driver of this public health crisis, highlighting a systemic issue rather than merely individual dietary choices.

While the challenge is immense, global examples illustrate that effective policy interventions can foster healthier food environments. Taxes on unhealthy products, healthy food subsidies, mandatory front-of-package labeling, trans fat bans, salt reduction targets, school nutrition standards, and advertising restrictions have all shown promise in reducing consumption of unhealthy foods and driving industry reformulation. However, the effectiveness of these policies is enhanced when they are mandatory, designed for clear comprehension, and implemented as part of comprehensive, multi-faceted strategies. It is also crucial to anticipate and address strategic responses from the food industry to ensure that policies achieve their intended public health goals.

Ultimately, achieving a healthier and more equitable food future requires a concerted global effort. This involves rebalancing the economic incentives within the food system to make nutritious options truly affordable and accessible to all. Policy makers, public health organizations, and communities must collaborate to implement robust, evidence-based interventions that address the systemic drivers of unhealthy eating, thereby reducing the burden of NCDs and improving the quality of life for populations worldwide.