

## The cost implications of a healthy diet

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A balanced diet is an essential element of a healthy lifestyle. The cost of healthy food may affect consumer purchase. The aim of this study was to compare the prices of healthy and less healthy foods in Maltese supermarkets and to determine whether the former are really more expensive. A list of 102 food items, consisting of 51 healthy and 51 less healthy food items were selected from previous literature and also taking the Healthy Eating Index-2010 (HEI-2010) into consideration. Food price data per 100g was collected from five supermarkets across the five geographical districts of Malta to ensure a representative sample. Foods were classified into distinct food groups and the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was carried out to test for price differences between healthy and less healthy foods in each food group. An overall analysis of the price differences was done using an unpaired *t*-test. The results of this study indicate a small, statistically insignificant price difference between healthy and less healthy foods, with the mean prices being €0.63/100g ( $\pm 0.55$ ) and €0.60/100g ( $\pm 0.36$ ) respectively. There were price differences in the distinct food groups, with healthy grains, protein sources, dairy products and miscellaneous food items being more expensive per 100g than the unhealthier groups. Such differences were statistically insignificant. Meanwhile, fruits and vegetables were significantly cheaper than processed foods by €0.40/100g ( $p = 0.034$ ). In view of the fact that specific healthy items in some groups were more expensive than others compared to the less healthy items and vice versa, the overall price difference was statistically insignificant. This study therefore suggests that the cost barriers of consuming healthy foods in Malta are not insurmountable, implying that it is possible to include lower cost healthy foods such as nuts, legumes, reduced fat dairy and fruits and vegetables in favour of the higher priced lean meats and processed foods.