



Monitoring the Cost of a Healthy Diet in Nigeria

Frequently Asked Questions



What is the Cost of a Healthy Diet?

The Cost of a Healthy Diet (CoHD) represents the cost per day of the least expensive combination of foods that meets the daily requirements for a healthy diet for an adult. It is the cheapest possible diet that meets healthy diet guidelines, given market prices of locally available foods. To be able to afford a healthy diet, an individual must have a food budget that is greater than or equal to the Cost of a Healthy Diet.



What is the importance of the Cost of a Healthy Diet indicator?

The Cost of a Healthy Diet is a useful indicator of physical and economic access to healthy diets. It is useful for identifying where and when healthy diets are more expensive, so that appropriate interventions can be developed. Interventions could include decreasing costs, for example through improved food production or distribution. Also tracking the affordability of the least-cost healthy diet provides information about also tells us when and for whom incomes are too low to access healthy diets, which can help target interventions and programmes. Where food spending is higher than the Cost of a Healthy Diet, but healthy diets are not consumed, it is often preferences and other behaviour or costs that should be investigated to help people consume healthier diets.



What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet is a diet that meets nutritional standards established by dietary guidelines to achieve adequate consumption of nutrients and prevent diet-related diseases. The nutritional standards have been established based on research and the standards generally include that food items must be consumed from several food groups and the consumption of each food group must be in specific proportions. Nutritional standards can be established by national dietary guidelines or international dietary guidelines.



Which dietary guidelines are used to calculate the state-level Cost of a Healthy Diet for Nigeria?

Nigeria has national food-based dietary guidelines, but at the time these guidelines were established, the research needed to establish the national proportionality of food groups had not been conducted. Hence the guidelines do not provide enough information to quantitatively define a healthy diet in the Nigerian context. To address this gap and enable the calculation of the Cost of a Healthy Diet, an international standard called the Healthy Diet Basket (HDB) is used. The Healthy Diet Basket was developed based on the dietary guidelines of several countries from different continents. The food groups included are similar to what is in the Nigeria dietary guidelines. The HDB mostly adds the proportionality lacking in the Nigeria guidelines.



What is a food group?

A food group refers to foods that are similar to each other. The foods in a food group generally contain similar nutrients in similar amounts. Examples of food groups include tubers, cereal grains, vegetables, fruits, and legumes.



What food groups are included in the Healthy Diet Basket?

The Healthy Diet Basket includes food groups that have been consistently shown as important across several countries. These food groups are 1) starchy staples (includes starchy roots/tubers and cereal grains); 2) legumes, nuts, and seeds; 3) fruits; 4) vegetables (includes leafy and non-leafy vegetables); 5) animal source foods (includes meat, fish, eggs, and dairy); and 6) fats and oils.





Why do the food items included in the Cost of a Healthy Diet basket change from month to month and from place to place?

The Cost of a Healthy Diet is the sum of the lowest cost items from each food group. The food groups and the calories required from each food item consumed from each food group remain constant, but the cheapest items in each food group vary by place and season. Depending on the season, location, type of market, and other factors, the cost of a food item changes throughout the year. Thus, the same food item would not be the cheapest item in the same place throughout the year, and the cheapest item would not be the same across all locations at any time in a year. (Consider the seasonality of fruits such as mango and how this affects availability and prices.)



If the Cost of a Healthy Diet is 760 Naira, does that mean that is the amount of money an adult needs to take to the market to purchase a healthy diet?

The Cost of a Healthy Diet is based on the prices of food items as they are sold in retail markets. In most food markets in Nigeria, food items are sold using a form of measure (e.g., cup, mudu, bunch, paint bucket, etc.) and there is a minimum quantity of a food item that most traders would be willing to sell (for instance, you may not be able to buy one piece of potato or banana or three stalks of a leafy vegetable). Hence, even though the Cost of a Healthy Diet is the least-cost required to purchase a healthy diet basket for an adult, taking this amount of money to the market may not get one the basket because the quantities required in a day for each of the food items is usually less than the minimum quantity of the item that traders would be willing to sell. The Cost of a Healthy Diet is also expressed per adult per day, because each household and family is different. Per adult per day is not necessarily how people shop for food; most people shop for multiple people and days at a time.



Are the foods selected in the Cost of a Healthy Diet calculated for my state in a specific month a recommendation for the specific food items I should consume to achieve a healthy diet?

No. The Cost of a Healthy Diet (CoHD) is merely the least cost of meeting dietary guidelines. Dietary guidelines themselves recommend food groups, and a variety of food items fall into the same food group. A healthy diet refers to the food groups consumed in the right proportions to support good nutrition and health; not to specific items. (The fact that the food items in CoHD are different in each time and place where it is measured is similar to how a person consuming a healthy diet might consume different food items every day.)



What decisions can my household and I make from the Cost of a Healthy Diet bulletin?

The Cost of a Healthy Diet was developed as a tool for policymaking and planning and not a tool for individual decision making. Food-based dietary guidelines serve the purpose of helping individuals identify and plan a healthy diet. Where healthy diets are unaffordable, people might seek social assistance programmes, or other ways of obtaining food that may be lower cost (or that substitute time for money), such as wild gathering of some food items or backyard gardening. Ultimately, where healthy diets are too expensive, improvements in food systems and social assistance are likely needed, which is a collective concern.



What is the relationship between food inflation and Cost of a Healthy Diet?

It is expected that the prices of all goods and services, including food, will rise over time. Inflation monitors the rate at which this happens. Food prices, and the Cost of a Healthy Diet are both expected to rise over time, and there is a positive relationship between food inflation and Cost of a Healthy Diet. However, food inflation includes a larger number of items than the Cost of a Healthy Diet, often including items that are more processed, as the least-cost items are usually relatively unprocessed foods. If the Cost of a Healthy Diet is increasing faster than food inflation, that suggests that at least some of the prices of least-cost food prices are rising more quickly than food prices more generally. Direct increases in food prices occur because of direct increases in the costs of food production and transportation from farm to market. Indirect increases in food prices occur as a result of general increases in the prices of goods and services which causes farmers and traders to increase food prices to be able to earn sufficient incomes.





Why is the amount of money spent on food for each adult in my household much higher than the Cost of a Healthy Diet and we are not even able to meet the dietary guidelines and consume all the food groups?

The factors that determine the foods you choose to consume are varied and can include cost, taste, culture, mood, convenience, availability, knowledge about how to prepare the food, and other factors. To determine why the money you are spending on food is higher than the Cost of a Healthy Diet calculated for your state, list the food items you normally buy for each of the food groups in the Healthy Diet Basket. Compare these food items to the food items commonly selected in the CoHD calculations, to see whether you are purchasing the least-cost items in each food group.

Even if you were buying exactly the same basket of foods included in the cost of healthy diet calculated for your state, the prices used for the calculations are a state average and you may be living in a location where food prices are higher or lower than the state average.

If you are spending a lot more on food than the Cost of a Healthy Diet in your state, assess the extent to which you can change the food items you buy to cheaper items so that you can consume all recommended food groups, or spend less on foods that are not recommended (e.g., salty snacks and sugary foods). Also assess whether changing the market from which you get your foods can help you achieve lower costs. Remember that the food items selected in the Cost of a Healthy Diet calculation are not to be taken as advice about the foods you should consume in a day, but rather an indication of the accessibility of a healthy diet for the larger community.



Why are there huge variations in the Cost of a Healthy Diet across states?

There are many factors that can lead to variations in the Cost of a Healthy Diet. Costs can be affected by the availability and productivity of a crop in a state, due to the suitability of the crop to the agro-ecological conditions in the state or level of reliance on imports. Variations in production and distribution costs, including land, labour, input, and transport costs, can lead to variations in the Cost of a Healthy Diet. When food items are transported from one state to another, the proximity of the state of destination to the state of origin, and the costs of transportation, can influence the Cost of a Healthy Diet. The cost of market space and storage are other costs that can affect the Cost of a Healthy Diet. It would be important to triangulate data about the Cost of a Healthy Diet with other food system factors in a state, to identify potential cost drivers. It is important to remember that just because foods are expensive does not always mean we need to decrease their cost; the goal is to make the diverse foods needed for a healthy diet available and affordable, while paying a fair price to farmers, traders, wholesalers, and others involved in producing and distributing food.



What information is needed to compute the Cost of a Healthy Diet?

Calculating the Cost of a Healthy Diet requires food prices from retail markets, food composition data, and quantitative food based dietary guidelines.



How do you come up with the number of food items that must be selected for each food group?

The number of food items to be selected for each food group is based on the proportionality of food items and food groups required in a healthy diet. It is interpreted from food based dietary guidelines, which recommend diversity within food groups to achieve nutrient adequacy. For the state-level analysis for Nigeria, the healthy diet guideline used is Healthy Diet Basket, as described above.





How do you derive/measure the calorie content of a food item?

The calorie content of a food item is determined from food composition tables. A food composition table reports the nutritional content, including calorie content, of various food items in each of the different forms in which a food item is purchased and/or consumed. For example, a food composition table can report the nutrient content of the raw, boiled, fried, or fermented form of a food item. The data in food composition tables come from research analysing the components of the food in its different forms, using standardized methods, tools, and reporting formats. For the calculation of the state-level Cost of a Healthy Diet for Nigeria, three food composition tables were needed to get complete information on the calorie content and edible fraction of each food for which prices are collected. A West African food composition table compiled by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, an international food composition table developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and a Nigerian Food Composition Table compiled by local researchers were used.



What is the difference between food composition data and a Healthy Diet Basket?

Food composition data provides information about the observed content of a specific food, for example the number of calories and other nutrients in a food item. For instance, food composition data will inform about the number of calories in 1kg of raw rice. Food composition data is measured using specific analytical methods in laboratories.

The Healthy Diet Basket provides a quantitative guideline for a healthy diet, including the number of food items and calories to consume per food group, as described in dietary recommendations. The Healthy Diet Basket is not a guideline itself, but a representation of international guidelines that allow us to calculate costs per food. For instance, the HDB informs that 1,160 out of 2,330 calories should be consumed from starchy staples, but that those 1,160 calories should come from multiple starchy staples – so not more than 580 calories should come from rice, for example.

Together, the Healthy Diet Basket and food composition data allow us to calculate the quantity of a food item that needs to be consumed to achieve the required number of calories for each food within a food group (for example, the quantity of rice needed to consume 580 calories). We then can use that quantity, along with prices for a specific quantity of food from local markets, to estimate how much it would cost to purchase a healthy diet.



Why are fewer food items used for the computation of the cost of healthy diets, instead of all the retail food items?

The computation of the Cost of a Healthy Diet is based on the definition of a healthy diet. Because we want to know the least expensive way to meet dietary guidelines, only food items that belong to the food groups in the Healthy Diet Basket are included in the calculation of the healthy diet basket. We do not include any items that are not required for a healthy diet – for example, sugary or salty snacks. All the items in the retail food price data that belong to one of the food groups in the Healthy Diet Basket are considered in computation of the Cost of a Healthy Diet. However, because of the proportionality of food items and food groups required in a healthy diet, not all the items in the retail data are included in the Cost of a Healthy Diet. When using the Healthy Diet Basket, the least expensive combination of 11 food items across 6 food groups are ultimately included in a state's least-cost diet for that month, out of over 200 items for which prices are collected.

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