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The influence of food prices on what we purchase, prepare and eat. Survey results and implications for the Heart Foundation's work

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Healthy eating is a struggle for many families in New Zealand when they cannot adequately afford food. Statistics New Zealand has shown that the food price index rose 12.5 percent over the past year with an increase of 22 percent for fruit and vegetables prices⁽¹⁾. Food prices now rate as the number one concern for New Zealanders⁽²⁾. To understand the changes households are making in response to increasing food prices 109 main household shoppers were surveyed. The survey was administered via Qualtrics in May/June 2023. Participants were recruited via social media and by direct email from researchers and Heart Foundation staff. Survey participants were asked about food prices, shopping behaviours and changes within specific food categories. Two thirds of the participants were female. The predominant age groups were 20-29 years (29%) and 60 and above (28%). The major ethnicities were European (53%), Pasifika (20%) and Māori (8%). Around 46% of people lived in Auckland with the next highest area being Nelson (and wider Tasman). The results showed 85% of participants expected food prices to get worse over the next year. To manage rising food prices 70% people had changed where they shopped or how they accessed food, 90% changed what they buy and 67% had changed the way they eat (e.g., cooking more at home). The most substantial changes were in the fruit and vegetable category where people changed the types purchased (73%) and purchased less (63%). In many food categories buying cheaper brands, in bulk and when foods were on special were common responses. Rationing or going without was a consistent theme highlighted with meat/poultry, eggs, fish, alcohol and more expensive snack foods. The implications for the Heart Foundation's work include (1) reinforcing the importance of fruits and vegetables in the diet and to provide tips and tools around ingredient substitution, (2) promote alternative protein sources (e.g., beans and legumes) as an affordable ingredient and recipes to support their use and (3) supporting companies to improve the composition of cheaper brands through food reformulation. With this being a small sample size, it may not be fully generalisable to the entire population however given the survey found a high percentage of people making changes it does indicate the important role health agencies can play providing information, and advice to support people to manage high food prices.

Keywords: food prices; healthy eating; heart health

Ethics Declaration

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References

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