

Summary Findings: 2007

American eating and drinking patterns: 2007

On an average day in 2007, Americans age 15 and older spent 67 minutes eating and drinking as a “primary,” or main, activity, and 26 minutes eating and 66 minutes drinking (except plain water) as a secondary activity—that is, eating while engaged in another activity considered primary by the individual. Eleven percent of the population spent 4.5 hours or more a day on eating/drinking as either a primary or secondary activity. About 12 percent of Americans’ secondary eating and drinking occurred while driving a vehicle. Secondary eating or drinking was most frequently accompanied by socializing, relaxing, and leisure, which includes watching television.

Time spent eating and drinking

On an average day in 2007, the total time that Americans spent on eating and drinking—both as primary and secondary activities—and on activities related to eating and drinking was about 157 minutes (2.6 hours), adjusting for overlap of secondary eating and secondary drinking. Because secondary eating and drinking activities may overlap, total time estimates are less than the sum of estimates for individual activities. All comparisons presented here are statistically significant.

Men and women spent about the same amount of time on primary and secondary eating/drinking. Four and one-half percent of the American population did not engage in any primary eating/drinking on an average day. However, this group spent more time on secondary eating or drinking than the total population—an average of 57 minutes on secondary eating and 147 minutes (2.4 hours) on secondary drinking.

A change to the survey instrument for the Eating and Health Module resulted in increases in time spent in secondary eating and secondary drinking between the 2006 and 2007 surveys. As of October 2006, respondents could report “all day” for secondary eating or drinking, excluding time spent in primary eating and sleeping. (See User’s Guide). Thus, increases in secondary eating from 16 minutes in 2006 to 26 minutes in 2007 and in secondary drinking from 42 minutes in 2006 to 66 minutes in 2007 result not from behavioral changes but from changes in measurement. The percentage of people engaged in any secondary eating or secondary drinking remained fairly constant from 2006 to 2007.

In 2007, 2 percent of those who engaged in secondary eating reported eating “all day”, whereas in 2006, less than one percent reported “all day” snacking, representing a small, but expected increase with the survey change. However, 10 percent of those who engaged in secondary drinking reported “all day” beverages in 2007, a marked increase from about 1 percent in 2006.

The median amount of time spent in secondary eating was 15 minutes in 2007, unchanged from 2006. For secondary drinking, the median time spent was also 15 minutes, up from the 2006 median of 10 minutes. The median is less affected by a small number of high values in the population.

“Constant grazers” are defined here as those who spend at least 4.5 hours a day (about twice the 2006 average time) on primary or secondary eating or drinking activities. This group makes up 11.1 percent of the population. Constant grazers spent the majority of eating time on secondary drinking—an average of 8.2 hours. About 10 percent of constant grazers reported secondary eating “all day” and 33 percent reported “all day” drinking of beverages.

Individuals age 65 and older spent more time on primary eating and drinking (an average of 81 minutes per day), and less time on secondary eating and drinking than younger age groups.

Over the course of a day, about 23 percent of the population was engaged in some eating or drinking activity at some time between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. Between 12 p.m. (noon) and 1 p.m., 43 percent of Americans were eating and/or drinking. The share of Americans engaged in eating or drinking activities during the evening peaked at 40 percent between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m.

Not surprisingly, people who live alone were more likely to eat alone. Individuals in single-person households ate alone for primary eating/drinking 81 percent of the time. For secondary eating/drinking, 47 percent ate or drank alone, and an additional 41 percent ate or drank at work or while grooming (or other personal activity). No information was collected on whether the respondent was alone or with someone for time spent at work or while engaged in a personal activity.

People in multi-person households ate with household members 47 percent of time for primary eating. However, only 23 percent of secondary eating/drinking time was with household members, and a total of 37 percent of the time was at work or while engaged in personal activities, about the same as for persons who live alone.

Estimating total time eating and drinking

There are three major considerations in estimating the total time spent on eating and drinking. First, as the data are collected, if a respondent reports both secondary eating and secondary drinking during a primary activity, it is not known whether secondary eating and secondary drinking occurs at the same time. ERS developed a method of estimating total time spent on secondary eating and drinking to account for this overlap. An alternative approach is to use a range of total time. ERS also recommends analyzing primary and secondary time use components separately. Most secondary eating is done without secondary drinking and vice versa; in only 36 percent of the cases were both secondary eating and secondary drinking reported during the same primary activity.

Second, when summing any primary activity and any secondary activity, there is a concern that the intensity of the activities may be different. Consequently, the sum may overstate the total time spent on eating and drinking. Third, due to the constraints of a 24-hour day, primary and secondary activities should not be summed since this would result in a day longer than 24 hours. See Documentation and Methodology.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food Stamp Program participants

Among low-income households, individuals in households participating in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) spent more time grocery shopping, preparing food, and caring for children than individuals in low-income nonparticipating households. The time engaged in housework was also about the same for the two groups.

Respondents in FSP-participating households were less likely to report excellent or very good general health, and more likely to report good, fair, or poor health. Indeed, 13 percent of individuals in FSP households reported poor general health, whereas only 3 percent of the total population considered their general health status as poor.

Meals obtained at school or day care

Respondents from households with children 18 years of age or younger were asked if children in the household obtained meals prepared at school, day care, or a summer program. In 2007, 60 percent of households with children reported that at least one child obtained either breakfast, lunch or both meals from school, day care or a summer program. In such households, adult respondents spent more time in paid work, and less time in child care, housework, and grocery shopping than did respondents from other households with children. Interestingly, they did not spend less time in food preparation and cleanup.

Grocery shopping and meal preparation

Based on self-reports, 48 percent of men were not the usual person responsible for grocery shopping in the household and 54 percent said they were not usual person responsible for meal preparation; nearly three-quarters of women said they were the usual person responsible for both tasks. In addition, men were more likely than women to respond that these tasks were split equally.

Among the usual grocery shoppers in the household for all persons age 18 and older, men spent an average of 6 minutes a day grocery shopping, compared with 8 minutes for women. Looking only at men who actually grocery shopped, the average time was 40 minutes (noting that grocery shopping is not a daily activity). All women averaged 9 minutes a day grocery shopping, and among only those women who actually shopped, they spent an average of 45 minutes.

Of those who split grocery shopping equally with other household members, men still averaged 8 minutes a day on the task, and women, 9 minutes. Among only those who grocery shopped, men spent 40 minutes and women 50 minutes.

Among the usual meal preparers, men spent an average of 27 minutes a day preparing meals, and women, 54 minutes. Of those who split meal preparation equally with other household members, men spent an average of 25 minutes a day, and women, 37 minutes.

Body Mass Index

In 2007, time spent by Americans age 20 and older on eating and drinking did not vary by Body Mass Index (BMI)—underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese. However, the average times spent by Americans working for pay, sleeping, watching television, and participating in sports and exercise varied considerably by BMI levels. Individuals who are overweight or obese spent more time watching television and less time participating in sports and exercise than did those of normal weight. The overweight group spent the most time engaged in paid work activities and had a low average time spent sleeping. The underweight group spent a greater amount of time sleeping than the other groups.

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