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Americans' Eating Patterns and Time Spent on Food: The 2014 Eating & Health Module Data

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What Is the Issue?

Examining the eating patterns of the U.S. population is a key factor to improving our understanding of Americans' nutrition and health. Analyzing the time Americans spend in various activities and, in particular, food-related activities, may provide some insight into why nutrition and health outcomes vary over time and across different segments of the population. A better understanding of these factors could improve programs and policies targeted at reducing obesity and improving overall nutrition. ERS developed a survey on Americans' time-use patterns and eating, soft drink consumption, Body Mass Index (BMI), exercise frequency, USDA food assistance program participation, grocery shopping, meal preparation, meat thermometer usage, and raw milk consumption over 2014. This report presents a first look at the data for an average day in 2014.

What Did the Study Find?

- Americans spent 64 minutes in eating and drinking as a “primary” or main activity, and 16 minutes eating as a secondary activity—that is, eating while doing something else. Men spent more time engaged in primary eating and drinking than women, and more women report engaging in secondary eating than men.
- Comparing data from 2014 (64 minutes) versus 2006-08 (67 minutes), time spent in primary eating and drinking declined by an average of 3 minutes a day while secondary eating stayed about the same at 16 minutes.
- More men reported consuming regular soft drinks while engaged in other activities, while more women reported consuming diet soft drinks. Those who consumed diet soft drinks had a higher average BMI than those who consumed regular soft drinks.
- Of household meal preparers, 89 percent had prepared meat in the previous week, and of those, 13 percent used a meat/food thermometer. Those who prepared meat spent an average of 51 minutes in meal preparation and cleanup, and those who did not spent about half the time, averaging 26 minutes.

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- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) participants, and those with household income less than 185 percent of the poverty threshold, spent more time in food preparation and cleanup than others. In addition, SNAP participants waited longer between grocery shopping trips than others. Food-insufficient individuals were the least likely to grocery shop on any given day.
- Obese individuals spent an average of 3.2 hours watching television and movies per day, compared to normal-weight individuals who spent an average of 2.5 hours a day.
- Two-thirds of normal-weight individuals reported exercising in the previous week, while 53.9 percent of obese individuals exercised in the previous week.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data for this study come from the Eating & Health Module (EHM), a supplement to the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. A previous version of the EHM was fielded over 2006-08. This report uses the 2014 EHM data, and future reports will cover 2015-16 EHM data. The 2014 EHM resulted in 11,212 completed interviews of individuals age 15 or over. All information is self-reported by respondents. Weighting factors were used in order to produce nationally representative estimates.