

Low-price food and health inequality

An explorative study from Switzerland

Project: 381

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In periods of economic stress, the importance of low-price food options increases, particularly among lower-income consumers. The question arises: From a public health perspective, can systematic connections be found between the availability of low-price food among retailers and social inequality when it comes to opportunities for eating healthily? The present explorative study approaches this question by examining three aspects:

- a) a comparison between the composition of low-price food offerings and the food pyramid issued by the Swiss Society for Nutrition (2008);
- b) a comparison between the energy density of low-price foods and the energy density of the standard range of offerings; and
- c) a comparison between the package sizes of low-price foods and the package sizes of the standard range of offerings

The corresponding data were meticulously gathered on location in stores belonging to Switzerland's two leading supermarket chains and were supplemented with web-based research where necessary. Comparable food products found in the low-price range of offerings and the standard range of offerings were photographed to capture their content information (composition, nutritional information, and weight). This information provided the core data for analysis.

The results show that

- a) the distribution of food offerings in the low-price range deviates greatly from the recommendations of the food pyramid (the groups containing sweets/soft drinks and meat/dairy products are overrepresented, whereas the selection of vegetables and fruits is much smaller in the low-price range);
- b) regarding energy density, the low-price product lines display beneficial compositions in some cases, and disadvantageous compositions in others. Within the subgroup of sweets, higher caloric contents can be found in the low-price product lines when compared to the standard product lines;
- c) 71% of the low-price products studied display larger package sizes, sometimes significantly so, when compared to equivalent products in the standard price range.

In conclusion, low-price foods are indeed important for lower-income consumers maintaining a careful household budget, but the present study provides preliminary evidence that products in this category which do not adhere to health-promotion and disease-prevention criteria may possibly contribute to social inequality in the area of nutrition.

Key words: nutrition, low-price food, social inequality, obesity