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Tighter Belts Mean Thicker Waists

By JENNIFER WATERS

Wallets may have gotten thinner during this recession, but waistlines have expanded.

As the unemployment rate inches toward 10% and U.S. consumers continue to find themselves strapped for cash, many are turning to cheaper fare to better balance their budgets. That often means fast food and canned and frozen processed foods that are higher in fat and calories and are made with refined grains and sugars.

The result: More Americans are getting fatter and becoming more at risk of getting illnesses such as diabetes.

'Eating healthy has been one of the big casualties of this economic downturn,' says Harry Balzer, chief industry analyst at NPD Group and author of the research firm's annual "Eating Patterns in America" report. "Last year, consumers cut back on eating 'better-for-you' and organic foods."

In an online survey this summer of 1,200 people about food affordability, conducted by food-industry research firm Technomic, 70% of respondents said healthier foods are increasingly difficult to afford.

'Value is what counts to consumers right now,' says Bob Goldin, executive vice president at Technomic. "And, unfortunately, in the minds of many consumers, a lot of these lower-priced options are just not as healthy, but they're still buying them."

A Nation of Snackers

Consumers are turning to more affordable grab-and-go alternatives such as chips, cookies, candy, snack wraps and mini-burgers in between meals -- and often in lieu of a formal meal -- according to a number of industry studies, including one by NPD Group.

Market-research firm Mintel sees double-digit sales gains in the U.S. this year for salty snacks, popcorn and cheese snacks. Potato-chip sales are on a path to increase 22% this year, compared with all of 2007, according to Mintel. Tortilla-chip sales are up 18%.

'Snacks are less and less the hunger-soothing bridge between formal meals,' says Kimberly Egan, chief executive of the Center for Culinary Development, an industry development and research company that tracks consumer trends. "They have become valuable gastronomical events in their own right."

Not From Scratch

And as the struggling restaurant industry can attest, more consumers are eating at home. But that doesn't mean they are making things from scratch. More people are microwaving frozen pizza or bringing home fast food, according to

NPD Group.

"Approximately 20% of all meals prepared in our homes from 1990 to 2007 involved the use of a microwave," says Mr. Balzer. But in 2008, microwave usage rose to 30%. NPD Group, which has been following the microwaving habits of American consumers for nearly two decades, attributes that gain to the troubled economy.

Not surprising, then, are the rising rates of obesity and diabetes. The obesity rate climbed more than one percentage point to 26.4% in September from a year earlier, according to the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, a measure of U.S. health compiled by the Gallup research firm and wellness-program provider Healthways.

Better Options

It's not impossible to be both budget- and health-conscious when it comes to food, however. Here are some tips:

Think ahead. Planning out your meals and snacks in advance forces you to think more about the types of foods you are eating.

Make a shopping list. Studies show that people who make shopping lists -- and stick to them -- are less likely to make impulsive purchases of things like candy, chips or a box of donuts.

Buy in bulk. Buying 32 ounces of yogurt can cost less than buying four eight-ounce containers. In some cases, the savings of buying in bulk versus the premium-preportioned packages can run upward of 50%, according to grocery-store price surveys.

Make it yourself. You can find a multitude of 10-minute recipes online that use healthy and affordable ingredients. And you can be both time- and budget-conscious by making a few larger meals early in the week and freezing smaller portions for later use.

Pack a lunch. Take leftovers for lunch and bring your own snacks to work. This will save you money and keep you from binging on vending-machine fare when hunger strikes.

Cut down on sugary drinks. Water is cheaper -- and better for you. If you still crave some flavor, squeeze the juice of a lime or lemon into the water.

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