

# The battle for better nutrition: the role of the escalating fruit and vegetable prices

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The cost of fruits and vegetables is rising rapidly when compared to a loaf of bread or a box of Weetbix in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> The monthly and annual food price index reported by Statistics New Zealand revealed substantial increases in the prices of fruits and vegetables. However, wages for families in the poorest third of households have remained constant since 1982.<sup>1</sup> In May 2017, the prices of fruits and vegetables rose by 8.2% compared with the previous month (an increase of 6.6% after seasonal adjustment) while restaurant meals and ready-to-eat food prices rose by just 0.3%. In terms of annual change, fruit and vegetable prices increased by 14.0% in May 2017 compared with May 2016.<sup>1</sup>

There have been reports in national, international and social media regarding the high cost of fruit and vegetable prices in the past month. For example, expat Kiwis living in Australia took to social media—Facebook—to vent their frustration with the atypical New Zealand fruit and vegetable prices by comparing the cost to those purchased in supermarkets in Australia. Broccoli was reported to cost \$A0.87 in Australia compared to \$NZ3.69 in New Zealand, while cucumber and cabbage were almost 50% cheaper in Australia than in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> New Zealand Food & Grocery Council spokesman Brent Webling<sup>2</sup> stated that this rise in fruit and vegetable prices was partly attributed to the economic growth of New Zealand's "markets in Asia and the East". Not only does the increase in prices of fruits and vegetables have unintended negative consequences on the socio-economic status

of the citizenry, it also has serious implications for food security and nutrition of New Zealand people. One marker of malnutrition is the prevalence of obesity and its comorbidities such as type 2 diabetes. In children and adults, the prevalence of obesity is increasing, particularly in those living in more deprived areas.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, costs in healthcare are also rising.<sup>4</sup>

Household food security implies that adequate and nutritionally appropriate food should be accessible at all times to ensure the provision of energy and nutrients required to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. Bridging the health gap therefore requires a careful attention paid to the environment of food availability, choice and cost<sup>5</sup> since consumers with limited financial resources often choose energy-dense diets high in refined grains, added sugars and fats as a way to save money and provide sufficient food to feed their families.<sup>6</sup>

Fruits and vegetables play a crucial role across the life course for maintaining optimal health. They should constitute half of the volume of the ideal food plate. It is known that New Zealanders should be eating more fruits and vegetables.<sup>7</sup> New Zealand produces enough whole foods to feed 40 million people but for many New Zealanders and especially children, the supportive environment is not provided, ie, sufficient money and physical access to fruit and vegetables. The "5+ A Day" initiative promoted in New Zealand to enhance the consumption of five or more portions of fruits and vegetables a day<sup>8</sup> is a way of promoting health. On a practical

level, meeting the 5+ a day for a family of six people implies they need to purchase and consume 21kg of fruits and vegetables per week. The rising cost of fruits and vegetables makes this recommendation even harder to achieve, particularly for those on limited incomes.

With the general election only a few days away (at time of writing), it is now time for health professionals to add their voice for the need for a fairer society and revisit the essential cornerstones of a healthy diet and life, including an adequate and varied intake of fruits and vegetables every day.

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**Competing interests:**

Nil.

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