

Philadelphia Food Stamp Challenge: The Results

Out of the 36 participants who registered for the Food Stamp Challenge, 25 returned evaluations. The information below is based on those evaluations.

Participants ranged in age from 1 month to 73 years. The average age was 36. The length of their participation in the Challenge ranged from 4 days to 7 days. The average participant stuck with the Challenge for 6 days.

During the Challenge, 14 participants experienced at least one physical change:

Physical change	Number of participants
Fatigue	12
Headache	9
Stomachache	7
Difficulty concentrating	2

13 participants experienced at least one emotional change:

Emotional change	Number of participants
Irritability	13
Anxiety or worry	5
Depression	1
Self-esteem change	0

16 participants experienced at least one social change:

Social change	Number of participants
Couldn't go out to eat with family or friends	14
Missed other social activity	8
Change in relationships with family or friends	5
Poor job or school performance	4

23 (all but two!) participants reported changes in their diet:

- 23 participants reported that their food choices changed during the Challenge.
- 17 reported that the amount of food they ate during the Challenge changed.
- 22 reported other changes in their eating habits while on the Challenge diet.

22 participants “cheated” (chose not to follow at least one guideline at one point during the week). Examples of cheating included going out for a meal outside of the budget; taking free food from family, friends or work; taking part in a special celebration (e.g., birthday) that involved “non-Challenge” food; or ending the Challenge earlier than planned.

Here's what participants had to say about their Challenge experiences:

- “Twice, my preschool-aged child was given more lunch by her teacher, because she was still hungry after [eating] what she brought in. (The lunch had not changed from prior weeks, but breakfast was probably smaller).”
- “I couldn't exercise as much as I wanted. I was tired and my stomach hurt because I was eating so much rice and beans. I realized that running (which is a physical and mental exercise for me; it de-stresses me) is a luxury. People on food stamps deserve the right to food that enables them to complete their daily tasks. If they can't exercise, they will suffer other health problems.”
- “The Challenge was frustrating because I couldn't eat what I wanted, I couldn't do what I wanted to do...it made me feel out of control and that really irritated me. It was so much work to plan my diet every day and to think about cost instead of what I wanted to eat.”
- “It's easy to criticize people on food stamps for misusing their limited resources for unhealthy choices (I hear people doing this all the time). However, I learned that food does much more than simply fill our stomachs. It fulfills emotional needs, too. People on food stamps deserve good-tasting food and the right to eat food that makes them feel good. On my budget, I could only afford certain types of food (lots of carbs, etc.), and it wasn't the type of food that made me feel good. I didn't want to eat it, and I didn't look forward to eating.”
- *Reporter Doron Taussig explained in his article “Dietary Restrictions”:* “We put the paper out on Wednesday morning, which means lunchtime is occasion for a treat. Nothing spectacular; the key is that you get to socialize, and you get to decide what you're in the mood for. But on this food stamp budget, socialization is not really an option, and the element of choice that makes eating a form of recreation is gone. Food is no longer fun.”
- “It was isolating. I felt a sense of powerlessness because I did not have many choices.”
- “We tried for a week, but after 3 days went out to dinner, so that meal was out. The next day was fine, but the next 2 days included dinner out. It was like dieting, cheating, and getting back on the diet the next day.”