

Before the pandemic and subsequent supply chain disruptions, grocery shopping was always challenging for people with specific dietary needs. Some shopping cart contents are purely elective, while others are religious or cultural. But for people with food allergies, chronic illnesses, and other medical necessities that can severely limit what they can safely eat, the ongoing skyrocketing in grocery prices has impacted them particularly hard.

In recent years, food manufacturers and restaurants have vastly expanded their vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options. As awareness of allergies and intolerances to dairy, wheat, nuts, and other ingredients has increased, food labels that indicate whether the processing plant is allergen-free have become the norm. But while awareness and acceptance of different diets have increased, so have prices.

Food prices have seen staggering inflation in recent months. While runaway price hikes on such a dire necessity have throttled American households' disposable income, it disproportionately impacts people who had fewer choices among grocery store shelves to begin with.

## Department of Agriculture Expects Food Prices to Rise Throughout 2023

Across the board, prices are rising while incomes are barely keeping up. From December 2022 to January 2023, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by 0.8%, meaning an aggregate of all goods cost 6.4% more than they did when 2022 ended. Grocery purchases CPI, however, exceeds this with a 0.7% month-over-month increase that reflects food prices in January 2023 being [10.1% higher than they were in December 2022](#).

The USDA expects this inflation to continue throughout 2023, with groceries to increase another 8.6% while takeout and restaurant meals will increase 8.3%. While this prediction indicates inflation is cooling down, these are still far above historically high rates. External factors like similar drastic increases in fuel prices also impact the consumer price of food all the way from farms and processing plants to home kitchens. Extreme weather events are also negatively affecting food prices and logistics. With agriculture-heavy states like California pummeled by unprecedented snowstorms, food shortages are more likely to occur alongside price-gouging.

Egg prices have made headlines lately due to avian flu outbreaks among the domestic egg-layer flock. The USDA found that retail egg prices in January 2023 were 70% higher than in January 2022. They predict this trend will continue with a 37.8% price increase throughout 2023. The outbreak affected more than 58 million birds in almost every US state, which doesn't spell fast-falling egg prices in 2023.

Bread and flour shortages were a regular occurrence during the first months of the pandemic. It reached the point that bread-making became a skill many people gained as bakery sections at local supermarkets were often empty. Bread slowly reappeared on store shelves, but prices crept up as supply chain snags intensified. But according to the Federal Reserve Bank of St.

Louis, [the price of basic grocery store loaves significantly increased in 2022 and 2023](#)—long after the bread shortages ceased.

The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis estimates that the average loaf of white bread is \$1.88, while [whole wheat bread is \\$2.45 per loaf](#). But depending on where one resides in the US, bread can be as high as \$5-6 per loaf, especially if it is wheat or whole-grain. [NBC reports an \\$0.38 increase in bread prices](#) compared to last year, up to \$3.25.

The Federal Reserve Bank doesn't even track specialty products made for allergenic purposes on the CPI, such as gluten-free bread. They are classified as "Other Variety Breads" on the Producer Price Index. Interestingly, it [fell four points](#) from 2022 to 2023 after a steady rise since 2020.

Despite this decrease, people with celiac disease or other forms of gluten intolerance have not seen it reflect in their grocery orders. Since the consumer price of gluten-free bread is not tracked by the government or major research firms, [Healthline found it costs about \\$7.29 per loaf](#).

## Premiums for Allergen-Friendly Food Crept Up Since COVID, Still Not Relenting

There was always a premium for allergen-friendly foods and food designed for special diets, such as vegan and keto diets. This is in large part due to lower demand compared to its conventional counterparts, like gluten-free bread to white and wheat loaves. Producing these items is more labor-intensive than conventional foods because workers must ensure equipment is not cross-contaminated. With fewer processing plant workers due to mass COVID deaths, allergen-friendly foods are not being produced at the same pace they once were.

Depending on the product, input tends to be more expensive than conventional inputs. Customers avoiding gluten often choose products made with rice flour rather than wheat, but [rice prices are now expected to soar similarly to eggs](#).

Customers who need to eat eggs for dietary reasons are bearing the brunt of record egg prices. People with egg allergies and customers amenable to trying plant-based egg replacements are seeing the same overall inflation no matter what they pick. Long-trusted shelf-stable vegan egg substitutes like applesauce, chickpea flour, chia seeds, and ground flaxseed now cost more as seed production decreases alongside rice.

With commercial vegan egg replacers like Just Egg taking the culinary world by storm and [creating a \\$3 billion market](#), prices increase as they can't keep up with the demand that doesn't depend on egg-laying flock.

People with food allergies can still live fulfilling lives. Many can enjoy food away from home by carefully checking menus and food labels. But those with severe allergies, especially families

with children with food allergies where a fatal reaction is feared, already estimated they paid [\\$2,500 more per year](#) for comparable products before COVID-related supply chain issues began.

The families in the Frontiers in Allergy study cited spending more money on groceries every month once the pandemic was declared. They also estimated having higher indirect costs in food preparation, such as spending more time at different stores to find what their families needed and researching suitable substitutes.

With food prices surpassing historic inflation levels, they may spend an additional \$4,000-5,000 per year or more depending on the food items and dietary needs.

With fewer foods that are safe to eat and inherently higher indirect costs of food preparation, like time spent shopping and researching, people with food allergies and intolerances are paying the highest price in record grocery inflation.