

To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*



Highlighting public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health.

The Public Health Aspects of Food Deserts

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“Good nutrition is vital to good health [and] disease prevention, and [is] essential for healthy growth and development of children and adolescents. Evidence suggests that a diet of nutritious foods and a routine of increased physical activity could help reduce the incidence of [obesity] heart disease, cancer, and diabetes—the leading causes of death and disability in the United States.”¹

For each one of us, every new day brings significant challenges as far as selecting, obtaining, preparing, and eating those foods known to maximize our health and well-being. Meals should be half fresh fruits and vegetables, high in fiber, low in fat, and include no added salt. Drinks should have no added sugar. Both seem to be ever more elusive as we are presented with an ever increasing abundance of quick, easy, cheap, and (oh so) tasty options in the form of salty, high fat processed foods, fast foods, and heavily sugared drinks.

Many know exactly what we should be eating and drinking, are able to get into the car for a quick trip to the neighborhood grocery store or supermarket, can easily afford any of the items offered on display, and have the time, knowledge, and skill to prepare whatever we want to eat. Even with these advantages, we are far too often steered away from the healthy choices by expensive and clever advertising and marketing as well as the simple ease of shortcuts.

Now, what of those individuals who do not have these advantages? Many have never been familiarized with healthful nutrition, do not have access to a car or convenient mass transit for trips to a full-service grocery stores several miles away, cannot afford to pay for the limited and poor quality healthy foods available in nearby convenience stores, and are not familiar with the least expensive ways to prepare tasty healthful meals.

Areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, typically found in lower income neighborhoods, are known today as “food deserts” (a term that is said to have originated in the United Kingdom in the 1990’s).

A standard definition of a “food desert” with regard to distance from a large grocery store or supermarket (as well as extent of economic disadvantage) does not exist. However, it is estimated that 23.5 million Americans live in areas without supermarkets or other places where they can easily access fresh, nutritious foods. Additionally, 2.3 million people (2.2 percent of all U.S. households) live more than a mile from a supermarket **AND** do not own a car.^{2,3}

The United States Department of Agriculture identifies 46.3% of Fresno County census tracts as low-income food deserts.⁴ Food insecurity (which derives from these food deserts) is defined as not having continuous availability and adequate access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food to maintain health and active life. Food insecurity affects 16% of Fresno County’s overall population and 29% of our children.⁵

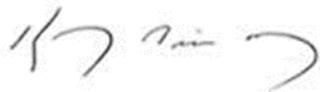
Much research suggests that food deserts negatively affect health outcomes. However, other studies show that even after healthier food options are made more widely available in food deserts, many consumers continue to make unhealthy choices. Increasing healthful food access by encouraging supermarkets to locate to underserved communities alone through tax and other business incentives has not been found to impact diets as measured by fruit and vegetable consumption and obesity.⁶ Other than convenient location, factors include the comfort of familiarity and prices, in particular the price discrepancy between healthful foods and drinks and calorie dense obesogenic foods and drinks.

Putting an end to “food deserts” will require more than changing zoning codes and offering economic and tax incentives to attract retailers with healthier food options to disadvantaged communities. It will require all Eight Pillars of Public Health to act to:

- Improve store infrastructure to maintain freshness of perishable products and increase marketing of healthful foods (retailers).
- Reduce the price disparities between healthful and unhealthful products (public officials and retailers).
- Improve local transportation (public officials).
- Organize local co-ops, farmers markets, farm stands, green carts, and community gardens (families, individuals, and community leaders).
- Provide food distributions through drop-off boxes to churches, community centers, and central locations (community leaders).
- Promote healthy products to consumers (retailers).
- Provide education on the health benefits of particular foods, preparation and storage, and cooking skills (educators, employees, community leaders, medical providers, and retailers).
- Bring your ideas and concerns to policy makers and local merchants (individuals, families, and community leaders).

Food deserts exist, even here in one of our nation’s largest agricultural production areas. They contribute to poor health inequitably in our community. They can be eliminated.

Here’s to your health!



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Citations:

1. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthtopics/healthyfood_environment.htm
2. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/takes-grocery-store-eliminate-food-desert/>
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5. <https://archive.cdph.ca.gov/programs/NEOPB/Documents/2017%20County%20Profiles%20-%20Fresno.pdf>
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