



# Healthier Food Retail:

An Action Guide for Public Health Practitioners



National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity





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## Notice to Readers

This document was created to provide examples of strategies which can be used to inform obesity prevention initiatives. Many of the examples and success stories listed in this document were conducted by organizations outside of CDC and the federal government and without CDC or federal funding; these examples are provided for illustrative purposes and therefore do not constitute a CDC or federal government activity or endorsement.

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## Introduction

## Purpose and Intended Audience of this *Action Guide*

The purpose of *Healthier Food Retail: An Action Guide for Public Health Practitioners* is to provide guidance for public health practitioners on how to develop, implement, and partner on initiatives and activities around food retail in order to improve access, availability, and affordability of healthier foods and beverages. The guide is from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity (DNPAO). With this guide, public health practitioners can begin work in healthier food retail or enhance work on existing healthier food retail activities with new ideas and practical tools and tips. This *Action Guide* will help practitioners consider the landscape of initiative options and engage in partnerships to support healthier food retail initiatives, assess the food retail environment, and evaluate healthier food retail initiatives.

The primary audience for the guide is state-level public health practitioners, particularly those working in nutrition and obesity prevention. However, the guide is also intended to be useful to practitioners at regional and community levels, with many action items and examples applicable at these levels.

This *Action Guide* is unique in that it is organized around public health roles, particularly at the state level, such as facilitating partnerships, doing assessments, providing technical assistance, or coordinating the work of local public health or communities.

### Setting the Stage: Definitions

**Healthier Food Retail.** In this *Action Guide*, we identify strategies to increase access to healthier foods and beverages through the establishment or improvements of retail venues, specifically in full service grocery stores, small stores, farmers markets, and mobile food vending. Our definitions for healthier foods and beverages are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010*. For the purpose of this guide, healthier foods include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, seafood, and foods with less sodium (salt), saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, and refined grains. Healthier beverages include fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, fortified soy beverages and other lactose-free products, 100% juice, and water.

**Availability and Accessibility.** Availability most often refers to the physical location or proximity of food retail outlets to residential areas, for example if a neighborhood has or is close to a grocery store. Sometimes the term is also used to describe the presence of healthier foods within stores, for example whether or not a small store sells fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, and other healthier items. Accessibility is a broader concept that includes availability as well as the selection, cost (affordability), and quality of foods. Healthier food options may be available, but if the prices of those foods are beyond the

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customers' budgets or if the selection or quality of the foods is inadequate (for example, limited varieties, spoiled produce, or expired dairy products), then the healthier foods are not accessible.

**Underserved Areas and Food Deserts.** In healthier food retail, communities are often defined as underserved if they do not have access to healthier foods in close proximity to their homes. What constitutes close proximity and access to healthier foods varies. For example, CDC provides a calculation of underserved or low-access that looks at presence of at least one healthier food retailer located within or close to a census tract<sup>1</sup> to highlight areas where few healthy options may exist. The definition of underserved or food desert used by the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) more specifically focuses on vulnerable populations by looking at whether healthier food retailers are present in census tracts and whether a significant portion of the residents of the census tract are low-income or do not have household vehicle access.<sup>2</sup>

## Rationale for this *Action Guide*

Obesity is a complex, multifaceted problem requiring a multipronged approach to achieve long-term reductions in its prevalence. Policy and programmatic approaches to combat obesity often include comprehensive environmental changes that easily enable healthier lifestyle choices. The United States Surgeon General's report, *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity 2001*, recognized obesity as a national public health priority, and shifted the focus of public health efforts from being solely on individual responsibility to include the roles that families and communities, schools, health care, media and communications, and worksites play in addressing obesity and reducing less healthy eating habits and barriers to sedentary lifestyles.<sup>3</sup>

The availability of healthier foods is an environmental factor contributing to a person's diet and risk of related chronic diseases. Full-service grocery stores, farmers markets, and other retailers who sell healthier foods and beverages such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy are not found in every neighborhood. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that nearly 30 million Americans live in neighborhoods without easy access to affordable nutritious food,<sup>2</sup> and persons living in lower-income communities, communities of color, or rural communities are less likely to have healthier food available to them.<sup>4</sup> What can be found in these neighborhoods, often in great abundance, are convenience stores and fast food restaurants that sell mainly cheap, energy-dense, processed foods and that offer few recommended food options, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, at affordable prices.<sup>4,5</sup>

Without access to healthier foods, a nutritious diet is out of reach. Making affordable, healthier foods more available to underserved residents is one of several strategies that may lead to individuals making healthier choices about what to eat and may be associated with better health outcomes. For example, research has shown that residents with access to full service

grocery stores tend to eat more fruits and vegetables,<sup>4,6-10</sup> although others have not found this relationship.<sup>11</sup> Studies have also found an association between healthier food retail access and lower prevalence of overweight and obesity among their residents.<sup>12-16</sup> Conversely, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is higher in areas where food is mostly available through small stores and fast food outlets.<sup>4,13,17</sup>

Many groups have recommended making changes to places where people shop for food to increase people's ability and motivation to purchase affordable and quality healthier foods.<sup>18-20</sup> CDC's DNPAO provided strategies that can be implemented to increase access to and sales of healthier foods in communities through retail environments in *Strategies to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases: The CDC Guide to Strategies to Increase the Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables*.<sup>21</sup> To further promote healthier food consumption, DNPAO developed this document, *Healthier Food Retail: An Action Guide for Public Health Practitioners*, to provide more depth on how to implement strategies for increasing access to healthier food retail. Strategies for underserved populations are also presented in this *Action Guide*, including ways to incorporate federal food assistance programs that allow low-income families to access and afford fruits, vegetables, and other healthier foods at most retail venues.

## How to Use this *Action Guide*

The *Action Guide* presents a broad range of strategy options that can be implemented to address access of healthier foods and beverages through retail venues. The *Action Guide* is not prescriptive. You may engage in or plan to take action in one, some combination of, or all of the strategies presented. The initiatives that you and your colleagues undertake to establish, facilitate, or promote healthier food retail will depend on your resources, the context of your state or region, and the priorities for your agency or organization.

Examples of programs and policies are presented throughout the text to demonstrate how others are approaching healthier food retail initiatives in their state, region, or community. Many of the examples were conducted by organizations outside of CDC and the federal government and without federal funding; these examples are provided for illustrative purposes. Topic-specific resources are described within chapters to provide you with access to more detailed information and existing tools that may be useful to you as you move forward with your healthier food retail efforts.

## Organization of this *Action Guide*

The *Action Guide* begins by describing how to support healthier food retail in your state, region, or community through partnership development, assessment, and evaluation. Activities related to partnership building, assessment, and evaluation may be conducted concurrently, and can be both iterative and cyclical.

The *Action Guide* then provides chapters that describe how to conduct strategies in four retail venues to provide healthier foods and beverages to states and communities: grocery stores, small

stores, farmers markets, and mobile food retail. These four strategy chapters outline information about and action steps for public health practitioners related to:

- ▶ Working with partners and leveraging resources.
- ▶ Providing training, technical assistance, and education.
- ▶ Addressing other common concerns for healthier food retail in underserved areas.

Lastly, the *Action Guide* describes two cross-cutting strategies, transportation and distribution, that are important to the success of healthier food retail efforts.

## Chapter Descriptions

### **Chapter 1: Partnerships, Assessment, and Evaluation (Partnerships, Assessment, and Evaluation in Healthier Food Retail Initiatives)**

This chapter focuses on partnership development and includes two partnership activities often conducted with partners—assessment and evaluation.

### **Chapter 2: Grocery Stores (Encouraging Full Service Grocery Stores to Locate in Underserved Areas and Promote Healthier Foods)**

This chapter focuses on strategies that encourage full service grocery stores to locate in underserved areas or that support existing stores in supplying and marketing healthier items.

### **Chapter 3: Small Stores (Improving Small Stores in Underserved Areas)**

This chapter focuses on improving small stores in underserved areas to increase the accessibility and promotion of healthier foods.

### **Chapter 4: Farmers Markets (Encouraging Farmers Markets in Underserved Areas)**

This chapter focuses on developing new farmers markets and supporting existing markets, with emphasis on providing nutrition assistance program benefits at the markets.

### **Chapter 5: Mobile Food Retail (Encouraging Healthier Mobile Food Retailers to Operate in Underserved Areas)**

This chapter focuses on developing initiatives to encourage healthier mobile food retailers to operate in underserved areas.

### **Chapter 6: Transportation (Improving Transportation Systems for Healthier Food Retail)**

This chapter focuses on developing safe and viable transportation options for people to travel to healthier food retail venues.

### **Chapter 7: Distribution (Improving Distribution Systems for Healthier Food Retail)**

This chapter discusses options for sourcing and distributing healthier foods for retail venues, including local or regional foods.

