

Healthy dining in convenience stores?

27 August 2018



For many, access to healthy food is a critical issue. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, about 39.4 million Americans live more than a mile away from a [grocery store](#) in urban areas and 10 miles away in rural areas. Of that group, the USDA estimates about 19 million people have "limited access" to grocery stores because of income and transportation. The agency has mapped thousands of communities across the country where residents live in such low-income, low-access areas.

Health researchers often have called those areas food deserts. But a recent study found it's not so much the "desert" itself as economics in general that is linked to poor heart health. The report, in *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*, examined food deserts in metro Atlanta and found people there have higher rates of [cardiovascular risk factors](#). But the researchers said the associations were mostly due to low income rather than proximity to a grocery store.

People turn to convenience stores to grab on-the-go food while traveling or as the only alternative when fresh food options like grocery stores are scarce.

But can you find healthy options there? Nutritionists say it's possible—even when faced with aisles of candy bars, salty snacks and cheesy puffs.

It just takes a little extra time and effort.

"Whether we are traveling or find ourselves at the convenience store getting gas or grabbing [food](#) on our way to work, lots of meals are occurring outside the home, and we have to be careful and vigilant of how we are eating," said Dr. Karen Aspry, director of the Lipid Clinic and Cardiovascular Disease Prevention Program at Lifespan health system in Rhode Island. "The bottom line is that as Americans and consumers, we should recognize that poor diets are believed to be one of the top causes of premature death in the population."

Another recent study by researchers from New York University, Stanford University and the University of Chicago found that food-buying and eating habits might be less about geography and more about differences in income, education and nutritional knowledge.

Whatever the reason for turning to convenience stores for food, nutritionists say there are a few ways to make sure the choices are good ones:

- Take a walk around the [store](#). Don't choose impulsively.
- Read labels. The yogurt might look healthy, but it also might be packed with sugar.
- Avoid the sugary drinks and the lure of the soda fountain. Choose water instead.

"The healthy things are sort of hidden and the junky things might be up front and glaring at you, so don't be afraid to ask questions," said Ilyse Schapiro, a registered dietitian with nutrition counseling practices in New York and Connecticut. "People are more health conscious ... and places like these are

trying to offer more healthy options to help customers as they are on the road."

Hard-boiled eggs, small bags of chopped carrots or celery with hummus and a whole apple, orange or banana are good options.

"Choose options that are as nutrient-dense as possible, but low in salt, sugar, saturated fats and calories," said Linda Van Horn, a professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine and associate dean in the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University.

Nutrient-rich foods have vitamins, minerals, protein, fiber-rich whole grains and other good-for-you ingredients. They are typically lower in calories and can help you control weight, cholesterol and [blood pressure levels](#).

Overall, experts recommend eating a diet based on a variety of fruits and vegetables; whole grains; low-fat dairy products; skinless poultry, fish; nuts and legumes; and non-tropical vegetable oils.

Another practical tip from Van Horn: Avoid impulsive choices while bored or tired.

"Think it through and choose a food that will help you get past the craving without resenting later what you chose."

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APA citation: Healthy dining in convenience stores? (2018, August 27) retrieved 17 April 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-08-healthy-dining-convenience.html>

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