

Nothing Fresh in Sight?

By Betsy Dru Tecco

In some places, healthy food is difficult to find.

Growing up in a poor section of Santa Cruz, Calif., Maya S. spent a lot of time at the local youth center. It's a place where people can play games, do homework, and eat. The food is especially important because, as Maya says, "it might be the only meal kids are getting outside of school." Yet what she remembers eating there is prepackaged muffins or chips and dip. Nutrition took a backseat to price and convenience.

Now Maya recognizes that the youth center is located in what she calls "a micro food desert." (Not *dessert*, the sweet after-dinner treat; it's *desert*, the dry place where crops won't grow.) A food desert is an area without easy access to affordable, nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk. That's the neighborhood Maya knows. "There's only a liquor store and a fast-food restaurant within walking distance," she says.

Environmental Influences

Most people in the United States are able to buy groceries at supermarkets that are stocked with a wide variety of healthy options. Yet many people don't have easy access to a good grocery store. Nearly 6 million households live more than a half mile from a supermarket and don't have a car, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Relying on public transportation (or foot power) to get back and forth from stores with fresh, healthy foods can be a problem for those people.

Poorer and more urban neighborhoods often have many small corner stores and very few supermarkets, points out Dr. Manuel Franco. He researches food environments at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore. Unlike supermarkets, corner stores sell mostly beer, soft drinks, and snack foods that are high in fat, sugar, and sodium.

People who live in a neighborhood with a lot of small corner stores are more likely to be obese, research shows. Obesity raises the risk of diabetes and other diet-related diseases. On the other hand, people who can get to supermarkets eat more fresh produce and other nutritious options.

Living in the Bronx section of New York City, Michael L. is surrounded by many corner stores as well as fast-food restaurants. "I mostly eat burgers and fries," Michael admits. Until recently, he rarely ate fruits and vegetables because they're hard to find and expensive.

The Hunt for Wholesome Foods

In school, Michael participated in an after-school activity sponsored by a local hospital. It taught students how to prepare nutritious meals from fresh ingredients. His favorite dish was whole-wheat quesadillas with cheese and spinach. "I learned about using different types of vegetables and about how I shouldn't eat too much fried food," he says. "It was completely different from what I'm used to. Now I like to cook for my family and friends."

To make eating healthy more affordable for students and their families, the hospital gave them coupons. The coupons enabled them to purchase foods at farmers markets in New York City.

Gardening programs are helping Bronx students find fresh produce as well. "Because the city has limited green space, many of the children don't know how plants grow or how they look in their true form," says Grace Walfall. She is the director of a school health program. By growing their own gardens on school grounds, students get to see, touch, and taste vegetables they might not otherwise get to know, such as eggplant and cabbage.

Trying New Things to Eat

Other efforts are bearing fruit across the nation. In California, Maya found a way for the Santa Cruz Teen Center to serve wholesome food. She joined a youth empowerment program called "Food, What?!" She was able to work at a nonprofit farm. "We got youth from the teen center to harvest a bunch of vegetables from the farm each week to make new dishes with vegetables like Swiss chard, onions, and bell peppers," she says. "Everyone was excited to eat things they had never tried before."

Today, Maya is still active in her community. She says, "I want to stay involved in this cause for as long as I can."

She's not the only one. In Massachusetts, a group called Act FRESH is urging the state to bring grocery stores to areas that need them the most. "We are also promoting healthier food in public schools," adds Valerie Bassett, who heads the effort. "Schools are a front line for healthy food access for children."

Helping bring healthy food options to people everywhere is a cause kids can get involved in. What are some ways you can work at school or in your community to improve the food environment near you?

Moving up

In 2010, the New York City Health Department started a project called Move to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables. City officials urged bodega owners to sell fresh produce. The result?



Richard Levine/Alamy

46 percent of stores started stocking more produce.

32 percent of stores reported more customers bought fruit.

26 percent reported more customers bought vegetables.

Better Choices

Even when we do our best to stay healthy, sometimes it can be difficult. Especially if we are traveling or pressed for time. Then the old saying beggars can't be choosers can all of a sudden seem very true. When you are in a convenience store, here are some alternatives to look for:

When you want something sweet, skip the candy. Look for canned fruit in fruit juice or with no sugar added.

If you're craving a savory snack, replace fried chips with baked ones. Also try pretzels or unsalted nuts and seeds. Replace cheesy dips with salsa.

Choose bottled water instead of soft drinks and sugary juices. Some brands offer flavored waters and seltzers that are low in sugar or artificial sweeteners. Look for low-fat or skim milk.