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Fruits & Veggies: More *does* Matter Food Environments

Only 8.7% of adolescents in Wyoming are consuming the recommended 5 daily servings of fruits and vegetables, according to a recent report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Though our adults are doing slightly better, less than 15% are meeting recommendations. These are well below our objectives for *Healthy People 2010*, and researchers and policymakers are scrambling to uncover solutions.

Why are we falling so short of recommendations, is knowledge the problem? I don't think so. Research shows that most individuals are aware of the guidelines for diet and nutrition, and most know that fruits and vegetables are good food choices.

Is good food too expensive? Though cost can be prohibitive for some, this does not tell the whole story either. Fruits and vegetables can be costlier on a *per-calorie* basis, but if you look carefully at the nutrients they provide the cost starts to balance out. If you look even further at the costly health consequences of a poor diet these 'health foods' can become a real bargain!

So why are only 1 in 7 adults and less than 1 in 10 adolescents in Wyoming meeting recommendations for fruits and vegetables?

Availability of good foods may be a big part of the problem. According to the CDC there are specific indicators of an area's *food environment*, and Wyoming ranks behind the national average in many key indicators of fruit and vegetable availability. This includes measures like proximity of healthy food retailers, percentage of farmer's markets that accept EBT and WIC coupons, and availability of fruits and vegetables in our schools.

Think of where you live: how many healthy food options do you have nearby? Now think of how easy it is to access unhealthy food. It seems like the deck is stacked against us, doesn't it?

Not surprisingly, more and more research is identifying our *built environment* as a major contributor to the multitude of health issues our country is battling. Whether the problem is availability of produce or the ability to safely walk to work, our environment strongly influences the choices we make on a daily basis. Unfortunately, many healthy and sustainable choices are inadvertently being engineered out of our daily lives.

Thankfully, the CDC has also identified several potential action items to help promote a healthier local food environment. Many of these are policy actions, including incentives for healthy retailers, improvement of transportation/zoning policies to increase accessibility to healthy retailers, and encouraging the production and procurement of food from local farms.

Fruits and vegetables, though just a piece of the puzzle, are certainly vital to our well-being. Our health as individuals and as a nation can be greatly improved by taking small steps towards promoting the local availability of fruits and vegetables. For further information on the benefits of fruits and vegetables and how you can help, please visit

www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*