



Food Environment

March is National Nutrition Month—a great time to reflect upon to our eating habits and decide where small changes may improve our personal health and well-being. One area that challenges many individuals, young and old, is eating enough fruits and vegetables. In fact, 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.

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. Sometimes it seems like the deck is stacked against us, doesn't it?

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.

Improving your *personal* 'food environment' is a little simpler (though it still takes some work). Try to keep fresh fruits and vegetables readily available in your home—this makes positive food choices a little bit easier. In addition, some canned and frozen produce comes in handy once the fresh stuff runs out. These whole foods do take a little more work to prepare but I like to think your health is worth it.

During this National Nutrition Month please give some thought to how you may be able to help improve our food environment. Though fruits and vegetables are just a piece of the puzzle, our health as individuals and as a nation can be greatly improved by taking a few small steps towards promoting the local availability (and affordability!) 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 of Wyoming Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Northeast Wyoming. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*