



Improving Access to Healthy Food

Access to healthy food is a fundamental right for all. Yet food-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease are on the rise, particularly in low-income households and communities where healthy food access is most significantly limited. People and communities around the country are working to change these injustices in our food system and ensure every individual in every community has access to fresh, healthy, affordable food.

A Nation-Wide Epidemic

Over 72 million individuals within the United States are obese and many more people are suffering from obesity related illnesses such as a diabetes (23.6 million people)ⁱ, cardiovascular diseaseⁱⁱ (80 million people) and cancerⁱⁱⁱ.

Diet-related Diseases Higher in NYC

- **Obesity:** Over 56% of NYC adults are either overweight or obese. In NYC, the obesity rate has gone up faster than national levels (17% vs. 6%) during a two-year period^{iv}. In NYC, obesity is linked with poverty: the lower the income level for the neighborhood, the higher the chance for those within the area to be obese^{iv}.
- **Diabetes:** Obese or overweight individuals are three times more likely to develop diabetes than those who are not overweight^v. The rate of diabetes has risen at a higher rate among African-Americans and Hispanics and is twice as likely to be found in low-income neighborhoods over others^{iv}.
- **Cancer, Heart Disease, and Liver Disease:** Being obese or overweight increases further risks for other health problems and diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and liver disease^{vi}. Heart disease is the number one cause of death in NYC^{vii}. Low-income areas have higher rates of death from heart disease and diabetes.
- **Access to Healthy Food:** When communities have access to healthy food, there are lower levels of obesity^{viii}.
- **Obesity and Learning:** Nearly half of elementary school children in the New York school system (44%) are overweight/obese^x. Physically fit children tend to perform better in school over obese/overweight children^x.

No Access to Healthy Food

Many low-income households do not have access to healthy food. In many neighborhoods in New York City the only food available is unhealthy – with too many calories and not enough nutrients^{xi}. Healthy food is not an option because there are no supermarkets in the area, or because unhealthy foods (with high calories and low nutrients) are offered much cheaper than healthier foods, such as fruits and vegetables^{xi}. Children suffer the most from this food system because they will likely eat unhealthy food for the rest of their life, which will lead to a lifetime of health risks.

You can change this unhealthy and unjust food system!

What can you do?

- Change what you eat! Change the system through consumer demand.
- Hold community meetings to discuss neighborhood food options.
- Organized with others in your neighborhood to do a Community Food Assessment to discover the food gaps and assets in your community.

- Engage community boards and city council representatives. Discuss access to healthy food as part of the health care policy, or the need for city institutions—schools, hospitals, prisons, government agencies—to purchase more of its food locally.
- Start, support and join community gardens, farmers markets, Community Support Agriculture sites, and food co-ops.
- Make sure there are supermarkets in your neighborhood, and demand that they provide fresh, healthy food.
- Get engaged in campaigns to support healthier school food.
- Influence the Farm Bill – Ask that support goes to small-scale farmers and community food projects, and not only to soy and corn farmers.

Want to share an idea or get more info on ways to get involved? Contact Nadia Johnson, Food Justice Coordinator: nadia@justfood.org or 212.645.9880 ext 237.

Please visit www.justfood.org for more opportunities to build a healthier food system!

This fact sheet was last updated October 2009

References

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JUST FOOD works to increase access to fresh, healthy food in NYC and support the local farms and urban gardens that grow it

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