

Medical center-based farmers markets improve health

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Farmers markets at medical centers may contribute to greater wellness in surrounding communities while adding public health value to a market's mission, say Penn State College of Medicine researchers who have developed and evaluated a market created at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center.

"Farmers markets are serving public health by increasing fruit and [vegetable consumption](#), revitalizing neighborhoods, strengthening local economies and empowering community members to learn more about the items they buy," said Daniel George, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Humanities. "Markets are increasingly viewed as one part of the solution to national [chronic health problems](#)."

A growing national trend is creating partnerships that strengthen the abilities of medical centers and clinics to provide complete, patient-centered care and serve community health through farmers markets. Of the 7,175 known farmers markets in the U.S. more than a hundred are located on medical center campuses.

George and College of Medicine scientist Wade Edris started the Farmers Market in Hershey in spring 2010. George and colleagues from the Division of Internal Medicine recently reported the results of their case study in the [American Journal of Public Health](#).

The Farmers Market in Hershey has five goals: increase community access to healthy locally grown foods, support local farmers engaged in

sustainable practices, establish opportunities for community wellness partnerships, build a community space for interaction between employees of the large Medical Center and residents from surrounding neighborhoods, and pay homage to the agricultural heritage of the land surrounding the Medical Center.

Efforts to promote healthy eating and lifestyle practices in the community in supermarkets, schools and worksites often show promising short-term effects. However, these programs often face personnel and resource challenges that stem largely from lack of long-term funding.

"To alter dietary and lifestyle choices over the long term, there is a need to establish settings that can provide a more sustainable supply of personnel and resources," George said. "Medical center campuses can be a promising venue for promoting healthful lifestyle changes."

For example, medical center markets can enable nursing and medical students and residents to develop their health screening and program management skills, researchers and graduate students interested in evaluating market-based initiatives, and volunteer staff committed to improving community health. In addition, market vendors can contribute to this sustainability through health-related programming such as healthy food demonstrations, distributing healthy recipes and participating in federal nutrition supplementation programs. Through this sustainable commitment, programs have a better chance to support long-term health benefits for customers.

The Farmers Market in Hershey is held once a week and aims for at least 80 percent organic items for sale, including fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meats, baked goods, coffee, and specialty items like spices, honey, sauces, flowers and prepared foods. Community wellness programming through medical professional-led activities that promote

public health education is a major strategic focus that differentiates the Farmers Market in Hershey from other markets. Three rent-free booths are reserved each week for community health outreach.

"The overarching vision for the market was to combine agricultural, medical and community resources so that the Farmers Market in Hershey will significantly contribute to the long-term health of the region and model how a partnership between a medical center and a farmers market can provide more comprehensive care for patients and families," George said.

Organizers asked hospital staff to educate their patients about the opportunities to purchase local fresh foods and participate in free wellness programs offered at the market.

"The key differentiating point for a farmers market located on a medical center campus is the proximity of experts in areas such as medicine, public health, nutrition, kinesiology and psychology, which enables the market to serve as a credible community venue for powerful public [health](#) promotion," George said.

Researchers say more analysis needs to be done of the effects of farmers markets on [medical center](#) campuses. The characteristics of market customers, the barriers to attending and the effectiveness of the market need to be evaluated more closely.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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