

Incentivizing healthier food choices

July 31 2014, by Alison Burris



Allison Karpyn of UD's Center for Research in Education and Social Policy is co-author of a study that identifies programs to encourage SNAP participants to select healthier foods. Credit: Kathy F. Atkinson

Imagine if your monthly food budget was \$133—less than 40 dollars a week.

When trying to feed your family, you might decide to purchase a 2-liter bottle of fruity punch for 99 cents instead of a gallon of milk for \$3.50.

That's hardly a healthy alternative but it is the choice that 47 million Americans participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) make just to ensure they have enough food on their table.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a study this month that explores incentives designed to [encourage SNAP participants to make healthier food choices](#). Allison Karpyn, formerly of The Food Trust and now serving as associate director for the University of Delaware's Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP), is a co-author of the report.

"People know it's better to eat healthy, but many SNAP participants are working families who need quick and cheap alternatives. They may not have the time or the expertise to compare nutrition labels," explained Karpyn. "They often grab the first thing they see on the shelf that's on sale and satisfies our family's preferences."

Unfortunately, these alternatives are typically higher in fat, sugar and salt. While this makes them filling, they are not nutritious. As a consequence, many of America's poor are also overweight.

"Most people are surprised when they learn how widespread the issue of food insecurity is in the U.S. It's a serious health issue that needs to be addressed," Karpyn said.

According to a recent article in National Geographic, "The New Face of Hunger," one-sixth of American's don't have enough to eat. They live in cities, suburbs, on farms and in industrial towns. More than half of hungry households are white, and two-thirds of those with children have at least one working adult—typically in a full-time job.

The USDA study brought together representatives from the SNAP

program, grocery stores, food manufacturers, behavioral economists and government experts to identify ways to incentivize people to buy [healthier foods](#).

"We wanted to develop mechanisms that were low-cost, effective and easy to implement for both the shoppers and the stores. We were looking for carrots, instead of sticks. This was important, to encourage participation of the stakeholders and positively affect people's shopping habits," said Karpyn.

The consortium collaborated to identify six possibilities, ranging from offering discounts on [healthy food](#) to designing a segmented shopping cart, much like the [USDA's Healthy Eating Plate](#). The top two alternatives are now under review for pilot testing.

Spotlight healthy foods

One of the more promising initiatives is based on a simple marketing premise. If [grocery stores](#) place healthier foods in more prominent locations, customers are more likely to purchase them.

By using better lighting, more attractive displays or prominent placement on end-caps, stores can increase demand for nutritious food. Shoppers in a hurry are more prone to select food that is at eye-level.

Stores could also offer sales, like "buy one, get one free," that would help stretch the budget of cost-conscious consumers.

Coupon program

Another approach is to encourage manufacturers to offer discount coupons to SNAP participants through a USDA managed channel.

SNAP participants who purchase healthy foods, would earn credits to buy more food at the end of the month.

"Providing a means for distributing coupons to lower income households participating in SNAP is a potential 'win-win-win' intervention that could boost participation," said Karpyn.

Next steps

Researchers are eager to see these strategies tested in stores in the next year. In the meantime, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is taking a close look at the nutrition labels on foods in an attempt to make them simpler to read and easier to use to make healthy choices.

Congress is also playing a part as it considers the Food Labeling Modernization Act of 2013, which advocates for a single simple, symbol system to facilitate consumer selection of healthy product options, including among nutritionally at-risk subpopulations.

Until that time consumers are encouraged to stick to their grocery list to avoid unhealthy temptations.

More information: The complete study is available online:
[www.fns.usda.gov/approaches-pr ... program-participants](http://www.fns.usda.gov/approaches-pr...program-participants)

Provided by University of Delaware

Citation: Incentivizing healthier food choices (2014, July 31) retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<http://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-incentivizing-healthier-food-choices.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.