

California hospitals take obesity fight to supermarkets

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Enter a US supermarket and the dilemma is all-too common: Will what I buy be healthy? Fattening? A substitute? That's when many wish they had a specialist at their side.

"Shop with Your Doc," a program organized by a network of hospitals in California, aims to help with that, stationing doctors and nutritionists in supermarkets to aid customers in navigating food choices in a country where a third of the population is obese.

Chih-I Lee, shopping in a supermarket in the city of Irvine, admits that she has a weakness for fizzy [soft drinks](#) but assures that her three children do not drink them and they eat all their vegetables.

Sara Foronda worries about diabetes, which runs in her family, and struggles to look away from alluring cookies on display.

Mike Keegan wants to buy organic products but sometimes they are too expensive so he takes home substitutes.

All are pushing shopping carts at a supermarket in the small city of 260,000 residents located about 37 miles (60 kilometers) southeast of Los Angeles.

And suddenly they cross paths with a white coat-clad woman. She is Monica Doherty, a nurse specialized in family medicine.

"We are educating consumers on healthy options to help them maximize their health," said Doherty, all the while clarifying consumers' misconceptions and giving advice including recipes.

Substitute mashed potatoes with cauliflower puree, for example, or sweet soft drinks with carbonated water, no sugar added, she suggested.

That is valuable advice to shoppers making their way down aisles crammed with mouth-watering temptations, much of it processed and packaged.

Nutrition training

Obesity is an epidemic in the United States, affecting 32.6 percent of the population, according to the World Health Organization, and 36.5 percent, according to the US government.

Although California has a relatively lower incidence, at 24.2 percent, Orange County, where Irvine is located, has an alarming rate: six out of 10 adults there are obese.

"Obesity many times is multifactorial, and poor choices in the grocery store is one piece of it," said Richard Afable, the doctor who is chief executive and president of St. Joseph Hoag Health, in an interview.

St. Joseph Hoag Health has been organizing these "Shop with Your Doc" days for three years now, and usually holds them during the holiday season when people tend to throw dietary caution to the wind.

The program aims to indirectly fight obesity by being focused on education, "almost training in nutrition," Afable said.

Similar programs have sprung up in other states, such as Arizona and

Pennsylvania, and some of the major supermarket chains employ nutritionists.

At the Irvine supermarket, the fight for healthier eating begins at the entrance, where a smiling Marina Sarwary offers to take customers' blood pressure.

And while the cuff tightens and the reading is registered, she offers dietary recommendations.

Doherty, meanwhile, is in the aisles, escorted by Jai Coutra, a program employee whose job is to hand out complimentary bags with brochures and a container and spoon to help teach healthy eating.

"Trying to encourage you to look at the balance in your diet: eating whole grain and avoiding processed food, less sugar, taking away the sodium," he told Foronda in the vegetables section.

The 40-year-old stay-at home mother, fearing diabetes, said it was difficult to stay away from sweets.

"It's hard because you go up and down the aisle and you see cookies and I try to get away from the cookies, I get an apple, or yogurt with berries," she said.

Real cost

"They are saying 'eat a little smarter, little bit healthier' and I'm already there, looking at labels—before I never used to do that," said Keegan, 56, a computer warehouse manager.

Healthy food is more expensive, especially in the United States where the government subsidizes crops like corn and soybeans, key ingredients

in junk food.

Getting people to eat better is part of a big socioeconomic problem, according to experts.

"We too often confuse affordable food with cheap food," wrote Mark Bittman, a food journalist who is a fellow at the Union of Concerned Scientists, a nonprofit science advocacy group, in his blog.

The long-term solution "starts with making sure that every American has enough money to buy good food at its real cost," said Bittman, a former columnist for The New York Times.

To do that, he said, would require food policy that encourages agriculture at its true cost, helping the 14 percent of the US workforce whose livelihoods depend on producing that [food](#).

That idea, however, looks difficult to achieve.

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