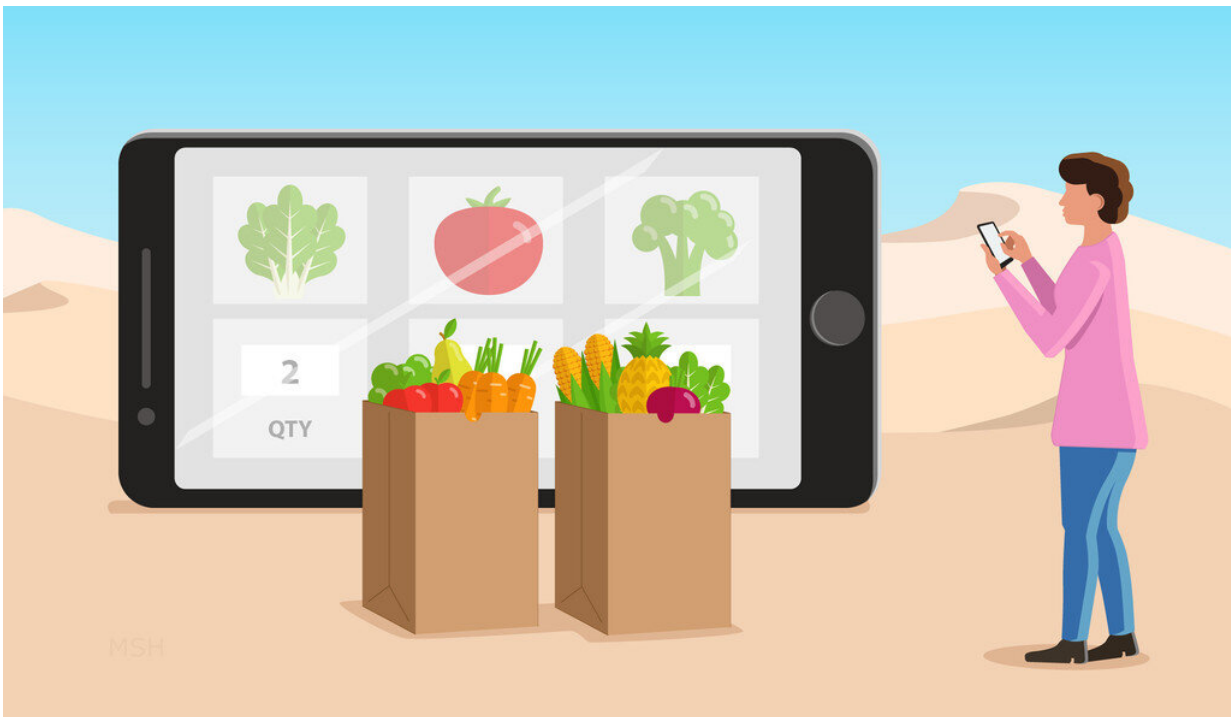


# Online grocery shopping leaves 'food deserts' behind

December 3 2019, by Jim Shelton

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Credit: Michael S. Helfenbein

There's a new path out of the "food desert," and it's as close as the nearest Internet connection.

A Yale University analysis found that most people in "[food deserts](#)" in eight states would increase their access to healthy, [nutritious food](#) if they

purchase groceries online and had the [food](#) delivered as part of the federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The analysis showed that online [grocery](#) delivery systems already cover about 90% of food deserts—places where access to healthy food is limited—in the eight states: Alabama, Iowa, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Washington.

"If you live in a food desert, online grocery delivery really stands out as way to get healthy food that potentially can save your life," said Eric Brandt, M.D., a postdoctoral research fellow in the National Clinician Scholars Program at Yale and lead author of a study published online Dec. 2 in *JAMA Network Open*.

Earlier this year, SNAP began a [pilot program](#) in which clients had the option of buying food via online grocery delivery services. The program was established by the 2014 Farm Bill; it may be considered for national implementation after the pilot ends in 2021.

Brandt's inspiration for the study was a visit to an urban, East Coast neighborhood served only by small convenience stores. "I thought, "One of the grocery store chains must deliver here—wouldn't that be a better option than trying to build a new brick-and-mortar store nearby or change the way local bodegas are run?"

Brandt then learned the latest Farm Bill had just such a program.

For his study, Brandt identified food deserts in eight states by working with data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Census Bureau. He also made use of a database of all stores that both sold and delivered groceries purchased online in the eight states (including department stores and big-box retailers) and also accepted orders from

SNAP clients.

Brandt said the benefits of allowing SNAP families to buy [healthy food](#) online are far-reaching and wide-ranging. In the short term, they provide nutrients and nourishment that reduce obesity, boost energy, and help heal patients recovering from serious physical ailments; in the long term, they promote better eating habits and behaviors, which can lower the risk for serious illnesses.

"When I see patients who have had a [heart attack](#), the cornerstone of their recovery is making better lifestyle choices," Brandt said. "Part of that has to do with the environment in which they live. It really influences the outcome."

**More information:** Eric J. Brandt et al. Availability of Grocery Delivery to Food Deserts in States Participating in the Online Purchase Pilot, *JAMA Network Open* (2019). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.16444](#)

Provided by Yale University

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