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Corner Shops Could Bring Healthier Food to Inner Cities

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Bringing healthy food programs to corner grocery stores in the inner city might be a step toward improving residents' diet and reducing diet-related illnesses, a new study suggests.

In Baltimore, corner storeowners increased their stocking, promotion and sales of healthier foods and customers showed a tendency to buy and prepare more fruits and vegetables through one such program.

"Inner-city Baltimore is a 'food desert" with many fast food restaurants and corner stores, but few supermarkets," said lead author Hee-Jung Song, Ph.D., a researcher in the School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University. "These food environments result in less availability of and accessibility to healthy food and impact on the kinds of food consumed by low-income residents."

The study appears online in the journal *Health Promotion Practice*.

The Baltimore Healthy Store program provided monetary incentives or free food to store owners, coordinated education about nutrition and developed guidelines for the owners to follow to help overcome language and cultural barriers. This is important, since most corner storeowners in Baltimore are Korean-American, while the customers largely are African-American.

The project educated customers by sponsoring in-store posters, displays and cooking demonstrations; it also encouraged owners to put food labels

directly on the shelf, distributed free samples and published flyers for use in the stores.

Eight to 10 stores participated from both East and West Baltimore. The east-side stores received the interventions while the west-side stores were comparison stores.

According to Song, the results suggest these programs might be a feasible and effective way to increase healthy food availability at corner stores and to improve the dietary pattern of customers. Healthy foods sold well and did not hurt the stores financially. In addition, questionnaires filled out by customers indicated positive dietary changes occurred.

“Creating a healthy food environment is important to modifying diet patterns in a positive way,” said Song. “Increased healthy food availability and accessibility is a factor in healthy diets at the household level. Healthy diets help lower the incidence of obesity, diabetes high blood pressure and their complications.”

Milton Stokes, a dietician in private practice in Connecticut, thinks the uniqueness of this study is that most nutrition interventions target large supermarkets. However, many consumers rely on corner stores or bodegas, especially in urban areas.

“Health providers can teach about reading food labels and making healthier choices, but if those choices aren't available, forget it,” he said. “To increase consumer choices, give store owners financial support to promote these types of programs and customers can vote with their dollars. We have to give the consumer a chance at nutrition by giving store owners a chance at financial viability.”

More information: Song H-J, et al. Korean-American storeowners’

perceived barriers and motivators for implementing a corner store-based nutrition program. Health Promotion Practice online, 2010.

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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