

Farmers markets inspire WIC moms, but grocery-store produce costs less

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When participants in a local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program received vouchers for fruits and vegetables at area farmers markets, they ate a greater variety of vegetables and more often chose fruits or vegetables as snacks. But a survey comparing prices at grocery stores and farmers markets showed that better produce prices could be found in local supermarkets, says a new University of Illinois study.

"The biggest effect the vouchers had was related to the quality of participants' diets. Those who used the farmers market vouchers ate a greater variety of vegetables and were more likely to choose fruits or vegetables as [snacks](#) (57.3%) over those who did shop at the farmers markets (46.7%)," said Karen Chapman-Novakofski, a U of I professor of nutrition.

In the study, 377 participants were recruited from the WIC Clinic in Champaign, Illinois, and surveyed on their dietary intake and habits. Meanwhile, prices were collected every two weeks at area [grocery stores](#) and farmers markets.

The median intake for both vegetables and fruit among study participants was two servings a day, but almost 70 percent did not meet the national recommendation for amount of vegetables eaten daily, and about 25 percent did not eat the recommended amount of fruit.

USDA uses farmers market vouchers nationwide to allow WIC mothers to purchase more vegetables than they could otherwise afford. About

half the participating mothers received vouchers for farmers markets; the other half did not. Fifty-seven percent of [participants](#) who used the vouchers had never shopped at a farmers market before.

"Growing and selling [fruits and vegetables](#) locally is a vital exposure and access point for clients who have challenges with accessing and consuming enough fruits and vegetables," said Brandon Meline, director of maternal and child health at the Champaign-Urbana (Ill.) Public Health District.

The WIC farmers market voucher program has been important in giving many residents the possibility of increasing their intake variety, Meline added.

"The average number of vouchers received was two at a total value of around \$6.00. This may not be enough to have a significant impact on vegetable intake. For instance, according to the Economic Research Service, the average cost per pound of green beans is \$3.23, and a pound provides about three cups of vegetables.

"So the most direct effect the vouchers could have had on vegetable intake was about six cups of vegetables for the participant and her children. Indirectly, however, the vouchers may have contributed to the mother's choice to serve vegetables, what types of vegetables will be served, and maintaining a positive attitude about eating them. The farmers market [vouchers](#) may serve as a gateway to exposure to more fruits and vegetables, and clients would use other sources of food dollars to maintain [fruit](#) and vegetable intake," Chapman-Novakofski noted.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend increased vegetable consumption to reduce the risk of heart disease, certain cancers, obesity, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and kidney stones.

"Not only are vegetables low in calories, they are powerhouses of vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals that are important for keeping us healthy," she said.

So is the WIC farmers market voucher program a success? And should it be continued?

The jury's still out, said Chapman-Novakofski. "This study has shaped our thinking about the way we promote these markets to economically disadvantaged women. Farmers markets are a good place to find fresh, appealing produce, and they provide a venue for cooking demonstrations and nutrition education, but economically disadvantaged moms need to be able to purchase produce at the best prices," she noted.

"It's important to note that not all farmers markets are more expensive than supermarkets. In some areas and in different states, they are less expensive," she added.

Chapman-Novakofski said that researchers see differences in farmers market use among states that have longer growing seasons. "We'd also like to know how much of the food purchased at [farmers markets](#) is eaten. And we're interested in how consumers view the quality of farmers market produce and the kinds of fruits and [vegetables](#) they most often purchase."

At the very least, the study provides food for thought and may influence public policy in the future, she said.

More information: "Farmers Markets: Costs Compared with Supermarkets, Use Among WIC Clients, and Relationship to Fruit and Vegetable Intake and Related Psychosocial Variables." The study was published in the May 2014 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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