



# Safe Routes to Healthy Food

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What does transportation have to do with healthy food?

Communities across the country are starting to understand how the built environment and food access can impact the health of their residents. Many communities have identified healthy eating as a focus of their efforts. Others are using active transportation - walking, biking, and taking transit - as a way to increase residents' physical activity through daily travel. Combining these efforts and realizing the positive health outcomes of both strategies can help residents live healthier lives in a more convenient way.

#### How can communities help their residents get to healthy food?

Research has shown that when people believe conditions are safe, accessible, affordable, and convenient, they are more likely to walk, bike, or take transit. As such, communities have two options to improve transportation access to healthy foods: (1) ensure transportation options that meet these conditions are available to connect residential areas to existing healthy food resources, and (2) locate healthy food resources close to residential areas and/or in places that already have well-used and developed active transportation networks. Healthy food resources include full-service grocery stores, farmers markets, community gardens, food pantries, food banks, corner stores with healthy food options, and other community-based initiatives.

#### How does improving transportation access to healthy food impact community health?

Easy access to healthy foods is essential in helping people choose healthier options for both eating and transportation. It can reduce the risk of obesity and other chronic diseases: children living in neighborhoods with healthy food are over 50% less likely to be obese than children in neighborhoods without these features (Saelens et al, 2012).

**“Low-income households are 6 to 7 times more likely than other U.S. households to not own cars. Nevertheless, most low-income households attempt to use cars for food shopping, even though more than half cannot rely on a car that they own.”**

- Center for Food and Justice

# What can be done to improve transportation access to healthy food?

Healthy food access can be approached in a variety of ways. Improving existing access points by adding healthy food options, such as corner stores with fresh produce, is one strategy. Developing new healthy food resources that are more convenient, affordable, and welcoming, including local community gardens and farmers markets, can be equally effective. Most communities use a combination of both strategies. Improving transportation access is also key: prioritizing sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and transit stops near healthy food resources and locating new resources in areas with safe and convenient active transportation networks.

Efforts to increase access to healthy food is of special concern in low-income, rural, and minority communities, which have been shown to have lower private vehicle ownership and fewer healthy food stores. Low-income residents and people of color in urban areas disproportionately have less-developed pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to help them get to healthy foods or other destinations. Rural residents often have further to travel for any food store, and, if they lack a vehicle, are less likely to make the trip.

The following are examples of work that has been done to improve transportation access to healthy food choices:

- **When siting, prioritizing, or evaluating transit lines, consider how they connect communities to healthy food stores.** This is especially



Zoning codes should allow community gardens in residential areas.

important when looking at connections between underserved areas and healthy food options, since healthy food stores are less likely to be located in low-income areas or communities of color. As possible, these transit routes should avoid transfers to ease the burden of carrying groceries and inconvenient timing.

- **Use “access to healthy food” as a metric in creating, prioritizing, and/or funding bicycle and pedestrian projects.** Focus on creating safe crossings in front of grocery stores and offering safe and convenient routes to store entrances that feel welcoming to people walking and biking. Avoid designs that make active transportation users navigate large parking lots.
- **Incentivize healthy food in stores where people already walk and bike.** Corner stores are a major destination in communities with less access to healthy food. In addition, residents often already walk or bike to these locations. Implementing a “Healthy Corner Store” program is a way to provide information, marketing assistance, and financial incentives to stores to provide healthier options to existing customers.
- **Update zoning codes to accommodate urban food production and distribution activities, especially in residential areas and in places that are already part of existing and well used active transportation networks.** Farmers markets, community gardens, or food buying clubs are uses that could be allowed in residential zones.



Corner stores can offer healthy, affordable foods in underserved areas.



# What is happening in Ohio?

Many communities are improving safe access to healthy foods with a variety of strategies:

**Vinton County** was a food desert, with no grocery stores in the entire county until a market opened in McArthur in 2017 with a grant from Healthy Food for Ohio. Because Vinton County is rural and has many low-income residents, grocery stores were unwilling to locate there. Lack of healthy food access forced residents to drive 30 to 40 minutes to buy fresh food. Now they are able to walk or bike to the store, which has a variety of fresh produce and other groceries.

Healthy Food for Ohio also helped bring a supermarket to **Euclid** in 2017 in an area with low vehicle access and income, where many people of color and new immigrants lived. The grocery store is within walking distance of residential neighborhoods and is on an existing bus route.

Limited healthy food options in **Lima** has led to an increased risk of chronic disease among residents. Due to the lack of full service grocery stores, the community sought alternative means to increasing healthy food access. Allen County Public Health's CHC Program helped expand a neighborhood garden in Lima to better serve an area with many food deserts, reducing the need to travel long distances to purchase fresh vegetables.

In **Knox County**, many residents lacked transportation to the Mount Vernon Farmers' Market, one of few healthy food options in the county. The market is now working with Knox Area Transit to provide transportation to and from the market to increase access.

In **Columbus**, a community development group on the South Side transformed a drive-through liquor store into a fresh market that provides 900,000 pounds of produce to food insecure families every year, free of charge. The market is on a bus route and in a high-density area where many people walk and bike.

Also in **Columbus**, Abe's Kitchen took a different approach. They developed food truck menus using the HEAT concept: Healthy, Economical, Accessible, and Tasty. Food trucks parked at schools or churches in underserved neighborhoods and charged \$2-5 for meals. Prices were set to be competitive with fast food options and to give agency to people buying them.



All People's Fresh Market in Columbus provides free produce to over 2,000 food insecure families per year.

## Can I bring Safe Routes to Healthy Foods to my community?

Yes! Everyone has a right to safe and convenient access to healthy foods. Initial actions to help gain momentum around Safe Routes to Healthy Food include:

- **Talk to residents who are most affected by poor food access.** You have to understand the problem to find the right solution. Meeting community members in their own neighborhoods and asking what barriers they face to healthy food access is a good place to start.
- **Conduct a safe routes to food audit.** The audit should examine walking, biking, and transit access to healthy foods resources. Invite community members, planners, and local decision makers.
- **Review local regulations to determine if they encourage safe healthy foods access.** Talk to your local government about adopting model healthy foods zoning ordinances (see Resources and References).
- **Work with local transit agencies to improve healthy food access.** Transit partners play a key role in connecting people to healthy foods. Fixed-route bus lines should be within walking distance of nearby grocery stores. Transit stops and stations are a convenient place to host pop-up farmers markets.



## References and Resources

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