

what is a food desert?

A food desert is an area in which residents lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet.

Food deserts can be rural or urban. They are places where the nearest supermarket is too far away for residents to shop often, either because of the distance involved or due to a lack of transportation.



Many food deserts are in rural areas.

How many people live in food deserts?

About 2.3 million households in the United States live more than a mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle. An additional 3.4 million households live between one-half to 1 mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle (USDA).

These households often rely on small grocery or convenience stores for their food. Those stores may not carry all the foods needed for a healthy diet, and those that do typically charge higher prices (USDA).

Low-income people who shop often at a supermarket buy more fresh fruit, vegetables and milk than those who don't shop at a supermarket (USDA, citing 1996-7 study).

Are there food deserts in Tennessee?

Yes. Food deserts are located throughout the state. Many food deserts are located in rural areas.

what is it like to live in a Tennessee food desert ?

where are the food deserts in Tennessee ?

“We try to focus on people making healthy choices, but if you live in a food desert, you don’t have those choices, or it’s incredibly inconvenient to make healthy food at prices people can afford.”
 -- Josephine Alexander, coordinator, GrowMemphis

Living in a food desert can be hazardous to your health. When healthy, nutritious food is unaffordable, or getting to a supermarket is difficult or time consuming due to a lack of transportation or distance, people often rely on convenient but unhealthy food from corner stores, gas stations, or fast food outlets. A poor diet is linked to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and other chronic diseases (IOM).



Jan Frechette lives on a mountain, 45 minutes from Chattanooga and 22 miles from the nearest supermarket. She doesn’t shop very often, and when she does, she stocks up. “We do it all at once. We have a big freezer, a pantry. In the ice and snow, you don’t know when you can get off the mountain.” When she can’t get to the store, her family eats “whatever’s in the pantry or freezer – pastas, canned goods, peanut butter.”

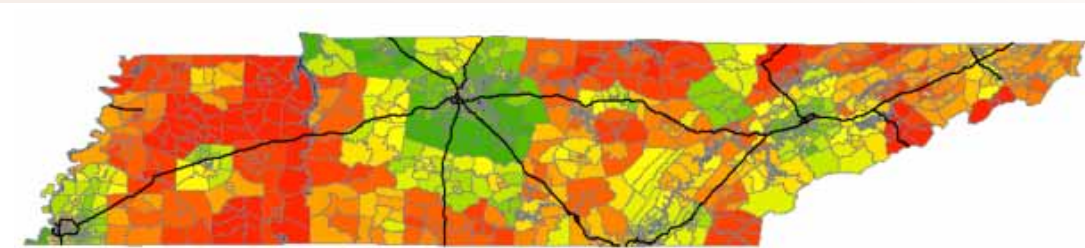


Jan works for the Department of Health, so she knows to make a point of buying healthy food. But not everyone on the mountain does. “I have neighbors who don’t think about it,” she said. Nearby Bledsoe County has one of the highest obesity rates in the state.

Researchers at Vanderbilt University analyzed US Census data on poverty, access to transportation, and food availability, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data on chronic diseases related to diet. By doing this, they were able to see not only where food deserts are, but where they have the biggest impact on health: food desert *impact areas*.

These impact areas are characterized by:

- A high proportion of people living in poverty
- A high proportion of people with limited access to transportation,
- Few or no grocery stores per square mile and more fast food,
- High rates of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure,
- High rates of death from these diseases.



Food desert impact areas are shown in red and orange.

Large areas of rural Tennessee are food desert impact areas.



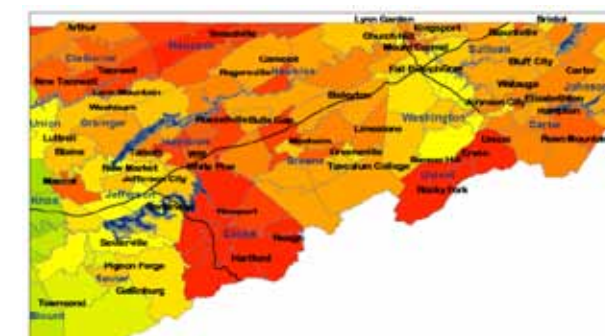
Central Tennessee



West Tennessee



East Tennessee



Far East Tennessee

what can Tennesseans do to help ?

Reduce economic barriers.

Help lenders make loans to build supermarkets in low-income areas. A bill in the Tennessee Legislature would provide for “food desert relief development loans” to locate major grocery stores in areas of need.

In Washington, D.C., one group is trying to encourage corner stores to offer healthier foods. They found that store owners are willing to consider adding fresh food, but can't afford the refrigeration units, shelving and messaging to the community to get the word out.

Provide healthy food choices.

Farmers' markets and community gardens in low-income, urban neighborhoods offer residents a convenient way to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. It's important to enable people to use food stamps at the markets.

One such community garden is located in Memphis. “We've seen it make dramatic changes in people's eating habits,” says Josephine Alexander of GrowMemphis.

Mobile Farmers' Markets – healthy food on a truck – can set up in multiple locations or even deliver boxes of produce to households.

Educate local consumers.

For Lllamar Simmons, of Memphis, getting to the grocery store wasn't the only barrier to healthy eating. “I don't know how to prepare all the fresh vegetables,” he says. He's not alone.

In some communities, cooking classes are offered to low-income families. The classes show how to cook healthy foods on a budget, and some even take the participants on shopping trips to show them where the healthy, fresh foods are and how to make smart buying decisions.

Some farmers' markets also feature cooking demonstrations that show people ways to cook the produce they buy.

Providing seeds and showing people how to grow their own vegetables is another option in some locations.



To learn more, go to....

SOURCES:

United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences. Report to Congress.* 2009.

Schlundt, D., Towner, C. *Food Deserts and Their Impact in Tennessee.* 2011.

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