

How America Can Eat Better

by Lisa Gosselin

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Every Friday, Matt Kinsch leaves for work early to go food shopping. He doesn't have to travel far: On the sidewalk in front of the Oakland, Calif., hospital where he works, a farmers' market is under way. One man sells organic strawberries just picked that morning, next door a woman piles cucumbers high on a table. "Since I began shopping for vegetables at the farmers' market here last August, I've lost close to 63 pounds," says Kinsch, a 53-year-old building engineer. "I used to eat a lot of takeout and pizza. Now, I'll mix up some kohlrabi and eggplant."

That's exactly what Kaiser Permanente hoped would happen when it opened the market outside its hospital in 2003.

Across the country, leading health-care professionals—as well as educators, lawmakers, and activists—are encouraging better food choices. They're convinced by research showing that five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day can lower the risk of developing some of the biggest killers in America—obesity, **heart disease**, and diabetes. In the last six years, Kaiser Permanente's associate physician-in-chief, Preston Maring, has helped to coordinate farmers' markets at more than 30 hospital locations.

On the East Coast, Harvard Medical School has set up a cooking program for doctors at the Culinary Institute of America. Similarly, a coalition called Health Care Without Harm is helping hospitals "green" up their food services by buying local produce.

The Obama Administration has made healthy eating a priority as well, committing \$3.2 million to promoting "specialty crops" that include fruits and vegetables. It has also introduced the People's Garden Project, which will create a sustainable community garden at the USDA headquarters in D.C.

The idea is that if garden-grown produce becomes more readily available, Americans just might learn to love vegetables. A **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** study tracked more than a million Americans between 1994 and 2005 and found that fewer than one in four were eating fruits and vegetables five times a day, as recommended, and that consumption of fruits and vegetables actually had declined.

"We think we are eating healthier because we are buying foods with added omega-3s or probiotics," says Harry Balzer, chief industry analyst at NPD Group, a market-research firm. Balzer has authored the annual *Eating Patterns in America* report for 23 years. "But this is a 180-degree shift from a few years ago, when the trend was to decrease the harmful, such as fat or sodium. Remember, a 1200-calorie burrito, even if it is made with free-range chicken and hormone-free sour cream, is still a 1200-calorie burrito."

To help people get a better grasp of calories, New York City passed a law last year requiring all restaurants with more than 15 U.S. outlets to include calorie labeling on their menus. California and cities including Philadelphia have followed suit.

Increased awareness of healthful eating—and access to fresh foods—already has led to wellness for at least one state. According to the American Public Health Association, the Partnership for Prevention, and the United Health Foundation, Vermont is the country's healthiest state. While many factors likely affect this ranking, experts say it's no coincidence that the per capita consumption of vegetables in Vermont is higher than almost anywhere else in the nation.

"There's a revolution going on," says Tom Stearns, president of the Center for an Agricultural Economy, in Hardwick, Vt. In the past few years, this former mining town has been transformed, thanks to the growth of cooperatives that connect individuals, restaurants, schools, and food banks to locally grown produce. The Hardwick model is being introduced around the nation now. Stearns has been invited to speak to rural communities from Florida to Colorado.

"Our goal is to create healthy people and healthy communities," Stearns says. And it all starts with vegetables.

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