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Community Actions for a Healthful Life

How to make positive changes

You want to eat healthy foods, but your vending machine at work offers only sweets and high fat snack chips. Maybe you'd like walking to do errands instead of driving, if only your neighborhood had sidewalks. Your American Cancer Society knows that there's work to be done to make all communities better able to help people eat healthier foods and be more active. Here we discuss our recommendation for community action, as detailed in our [2020 Guideline for Diet and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention](#)¹. We will also give you some ideas on what you can do to make changes where you live and work.

Recommendation for community action

The American Cancer Society has issued a call for communities to remove barriers that prevent people from enjoying a healthy lifestyle. Public, private, and community organizations should work together at national, state, and local levels to create, push for, and apply policy and environmental changes that:

- Increase access to affordable, healthy foods.
- Provide safe, enjoyable, and accessible environments for physical activity.
- Limit alcohol for all people.

Social, economic, and cultural factors strongly affect a person's body weight, physical activity, diet, and alcohol intake. Most Americans would like to adopt a healthy lifestyle, but find it hard to follow diet and activity guidelines.

Researchers have identified some things that are helping to make Americans physically inactive and overweight or obese. For instance:

- Many are not able to get healthy foods – this is often due to poor access or high costs.
- Easy access to and heavy marketing of high-calorie foods and drinks of low nutritional value affect daily choices.
- Lack of safe recreation and transportation in communities keep people from being active.

The current increase in overweight and obesity is a special concern in certain groups, particularly children, who are establishing life-long behaviors that affect health.

Many Americans face obstacles to leading healthy lifestyles, but the challenges are often greater for people with lower incomes, racial and ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, and people who live in rural communities, who often face additional barriers.

Policy and environmental changes will be needed to help Americans follow healthy diets and be physically active. And help couldn't come at a better time. About two-thirds of Americans are now overweight or obese. Heart disease, cancer, and diabetes – lifestyle related diseases – claim hundreds of thousands of lives every year.

Practical ideas to support good eating and physical activity

In the workplace – Many people spend most of their days at work. Employers can offer healthy food options in the vending machines and cafeteria, inexpensive access to a gym, and work-based health programs.

One person can make a difference in their work environment with these ideas:

- Start a walking club at lunch, before work, or afterward.
- Organize a team for local runs, fundraising walks, or a corporate challenge event.
- Find speakers for seminars on nutrition, fitness, or weight loss.
- Add healthy snacks to the menu for company events. Try baked chips or pretzels instead of regular chips. Get fresh fruit and veggie trays, and frozen yogurt with fruit instead of ice cream sundaes for a celebration.

In the community – With rapid urban and suburban growth, parks and recreation facilities are quickly disappearing, taking away prime places to exercise. There's increasing evidence linking poor access to sidewalks, parks, and recreation facilities to greater obesity risk. Neighborhoods that make it easy to walk, play, and exercise safely have less obesity. Voice your concerns by voting for sidewalks, parks, gyms, bike paths,

and green space.

Make change happen more quickly by:

- Starting a community watch group to improve safety for walkers and bikers – especially children. Most people say that concerns over safety make it harder to be physically active.
- Encouraging local planning boards to put in sidewalks, crosswalks, and traffic lights to make walking safe in your neighborhood.
- Ensuring that neighborhoods have safe places to play, as well as routes that allow kids to ride bicycles and walk to school.

Access to supermarkets has been linked to healthier diets with more vegetables and fruits, and lower rates of obesity. Studies have shown that many low-income communities tend to have poor access to healthy, affordable, high-quality foods. Limited access to supermarkets often results in people shopping for food at nearby convenience stores, where healthy food options are fewer, of lower quality, and cost more. Even in neighborhoods with supermarkets, low-income residents may buy cheaper, higher-calorie foods to save money. People with low incomes tend to eat more low-cost foods, which often have less nutritional value.

If you live or work near a low-income area, you can help by:

- Supporting supermarkets in your area that include fresh, quality produce.
- Eating at restaurants in your area that serve healthy food options and offer calorie counts.
- Supporting local farmers' markets.

In schools – Many schools don't require health and physical education (PE) classes, and many have cut recess to spend more time in the classroom. Talk to the school board about:

- Making health education a priority
- Offering healthy foods and drinks, and limiting access to unhealthy options
- Requiring daily recess or PE classes

You and other concerned parents can take the lead by:

- Starting a school health council.

- Bringing healthy treats for birthday and other parties in school.
- Asking your child’s teacher to establish an “informal policy” about foods brought in for snacks or parties. For example, fruit is preferred, and water will be served instead of fruit drinks or soda.
- Proposing different school fund-raisers that involve items other than candy or other foods of low nutritional value.

Free guidance and materials to create healthful communities

Find more information about community nutrition and exercise programs by calling your American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/healthy/eat-healthy-get-active/acs-guidelines-nutrition-physical-activity-cancer-prevention.html

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Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
(www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html)

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