



POLICY BRIEF

Which Healthy Food Promotion Strategies Within Grocery Retail Settings Are Most Promising?

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Abstract

This review identifies intervention strategies implemented within U.S. grocery retail stores that are effective in improving the healthfulness of shoppers' food and beverage purchasing and consumption. Results from our review demonstrate that nutritional scoring and nutritional messaging were the most rigorously tested and effective interventions. Additionally, simple interventions yield the most successful results and minimize shopper burden. Therefore, these strategies should be prioritized for policy implementation within SNAP- and WIC-authorized grocery retail settings.

Summary of Findings

Considerable attention has been made to the food environment and the ways in which it contributes to dietary quality in the US. Among concerning trends is the relationship between income and dietary quality whereby disparities in the price of nutrient-dense (better for you) foods versus less nutrient-dense foods are rising.¹ These cost barriers are one of the factors that contribute to socioeconomic inequities in dietary quality, leading individuals with lower incomes to have less choice in food purchasing, and worse dietary outcomes.²³⁴ At the same time, there is considerable research on the power of marketing to re-direct consumers, including those with lower incomes, toward purchasing healthier foods.

The present study examined 1,942 studies, and ultimately identified 73 peer reviewed articles which sought to promote shoppers' purchasing and consumption of healthier items within U.S. grocery retail settings, with a particular focus on those strategies that may be most effective when implemented within SNAP-authorized retail settings. In total, 33 studies analyzed single-component interventions, while 40 studies assessed multi-component interventions. Approximately 90 percent of studies (n=66) analyzed in this review were likely to have been conducted in retail environments that accepted SNAP benefits indicating a high degree of intervention scalability for increasing SNAP-eligible populations purchasing and consumption of healthier items.

Several promising categories of healthy food marketing strategies were identified including:

- ▶ nutrition scoring,
- ▶ nutritional messaging,
- ▶ non-nutritional messaging,
- ▶ endcaps and secondary placement,
- ▶ point-of-sale interventions,
- ▶ increased stocking,
- ▶ food tasting and demonstrations,
- ▶ nutrition education, and
- ▶ placement on shelf, interventions.



Reviewed Healthy Food Marketing Strategies

<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Description</i>
Multi-component interventions	Multi-component interventions signify a retailer's simultaneous usage of at least two of the intervention types listed above in a multifaceted approach to encouraging healthier purchasing or consumption.
Nutrition Scoring	Nutrition scoring interventions involved the development of a scale to represent the healthfulness of certain food and beverage items throughout the food retail environment.
Increased stocking	Increased stocking interventions specifically stocked a higher quantity of healthy food items to increase healthy sales.
Nutritional messaging	Nutritional messaging interventions utilized signage, flyers, or other promotional materials specifically noting the healthful benefits of certain items to encourage healthy purchasing and consumption.
Non-nutritional messaging	Non-nutritional messaging interventions tracked the effectiveness of non-traditional marketing strategies (e.g., scarcity labeling and floor labeling to guide shoppers to healthier store sections).
Food tasting and demonstrations	Food tasting and demonstrations represent interventions in which participants were given healthy food to sample and/or were shown how to prepare a recipe with healthier ingredients sold in-store.
Nutrition education	Nutrition education interventions involved "any set of learning experiences designed to facilitate the voluntary adoption of eating and other nutrition-related behaviors conducive to health and well-being" (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2022).
Endcaps and secondary placement	Endcaps and secondary placement interventions promote healthier items in a display placed at the end of an aisle or in other locations in addition to their primary placement throughout the store (e.g., in a newly installed refrigeration unit).
Point-of-sale interventions	Point-of-sale interventions promoted healthy food items in retail checkout lines or counters. Point-of-sale interventions differ from point-of-purchase (POP) interventions, which often signify all in-store interventions and are not limited to the checkout vicinity.
Placement on shelf	Placement on shelf interventions promoted healthy food items by manipulating the location of healthy food items on store shelves, often moving healthier items to eye level, or placing them on more prominent shelves within the store.

Which approaches work best?

Findings from this review show that overall, interventions to improve the healthfulness of individuals' food and beverage purchasing and consumption within retail environments are varied and heterogeneous.

Regarding specific approaches:

- ▶ Results of this review demonstrate that nutritional scoring and nutritional messaging are the most widely researched and effective single-component healthy retail intervention strategies.⁵⁶
- ▶ Nutritional messaging interventions, including simple signage at the front of the store, corresponding with shelf tags for reinforcement, are generally effective.⁷
- ▶ Food tasting and demonstrations and nutrition education, also demonstrate positive effects on healthy food and beverage purchasing and consumption, however, single component studies on these approaches are sparse.
- ▶ Non-nutritional marketing is another intervention strategy commonly implemented within grocery retail settings, however, results from studies examining this strategy are mixed.
- ▶ Collectively there is emerging evidence for the use of interventions focused on endcaps and secondary placement to increase healthy purchasing and consumption, although only a small number of articles (n=2) analyzing single-component interventions have assessed the approach alone.
- ▶ Additional research examining the unique contribution of placement and point-of-sale interventions, also known as healthy checkout interventions, are needed, although their use in multi-component interventions is promising.

- ▶ Findings from studies evaluating increased stocking interventions demonstrated that on its own, this strategy does not significantly influence shoppers' purchasing and consumption of healthier items;⁸⁹¹⁰ the strategy however may be effective when combined with other intervention types in multi-component interventions.

Two additional factors to consider when evaluating the success of interventions within grocery retail environments are their potential scalability and sustainability.¹¹ Across both single- and multi-component studies reviewed, results demonstrate that simple interventions with low information costs and minimal barriers to implementation are more effective than complex strategies at increasing healthy purchasing and consumption behaviors among shoppers. Simple intervention strategies are easily understandable and require little effort from customers, whereas more complex strategies can be difficult, and laborious, for customers to interpret. Additionally, simple intervention strategies not only benefit customers but also retailers, as they are both feasible to implement and able to be retained over time, potentially increasing intervention sustainability. Given the potential for in-store marketing strategies to shift consumer behavior, policymakers should examine the extent to which such approaches could be integrated into existing nutrition programs, such as SNAP and WIC. While some strategies such as nutrition education and food tastings and demonstrations are already implemented as part of programs like SNAP-Ed, they may also hold potential for broader application at the retailer level. Other techniques such as nutritional messaging may be more easily scalable, although feasibility studies examining barriers to wide scale application across store formats and geographies are needed.



For a complete list of references please see the peer-reviewed publication: Wolgast H., Halverson M., Kennedy N., Gallard I., Karpyn A. (2022). Encouraging Healthier Food and Beverage Purchasing and Consumption: A Review of Interventions within Grocery Retail Settings. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19(23):16107. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192316107>.

Endnotes

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