

Abstract citation ID: ckad160.1021
Monitoring the healthiness of food environments in supermarkets and out-of-home settings

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Background:

Food environment transformations are needed to improve population diets. Systems to monitor food environment transformations are often lacking, but can be useful to assess retail and food-service performances over time. Therefore, we aimed to measure the healthiness of supermarkets and out-of-home settings, including the assortment, price promotions, in-store promotions, and food marketing to children.

Methods:

Web-scraping techniques were used to collect data on food assortment (n = 37761 products) for 6 supermarket chains (market value = 72%). All products were categorized by food group and whether they contributed to a healthy diet (yes/no). During 8 weeks, price-promotions were collected for 8 supermarket chains (n = 23239 promotions). To identify in-store promotions (n = 7757 products) and food marketing to children (14 product categories, n = 2,681 products), 40 supermarkets (8 chains) were visited. Similar data was gathered for out-of-home settings.

Results:

80% of the food assortment and 80% of the products featuring in supermarkets' price- and in-store promotions were not supportive of a healthy diet. In addition, 73% of the check-outs offered snacks, but lacked healthy options. 97% of the food marketing to children was for products not supporting healthy diets. The top five most available food products in supermarkets were: non-alcoholic beverages, alcohol, sweets, biscuits, meat, and poultry (36% of the entire assortment). Non-alcoholic drinks, sweets and confections, alcoholic beverages, dairy, and ready-to-eat meals were the most featured products in price-promotions. Even less supportive observations were found for out-of-home settings.

Conclusions:

Dutch food environments primarily consist of products and promotions that do not contribute to a healthy diet. Regular monitoring is needed to identify whether policies are effective to improve food environments.

Key messages:

- The current food assortment, price promotions, in-store promotions, and food marketing to children of supermarkets and out-of-home settings are not supportive of healthy food choices.
- Monitoring food environments can be useful to assess retail and food-service performances over time, and to identify whether policies are effective to improve food environments.