

Healthy eating in a food desert hard, but not impossible

Dear readers: Kya-jia Mourning is a fourth-year medical student interested in family medicine and orthopedics. She hopes to eventually return to provide care to people in or near her small hometown in rural eastern North Carolina. For this article, she gathered information from her own experience and from dietitians and others she worked with earlier last month in Family Medicine nutrition. Here is what she wants to share about overcoming the barriers to eating a healthy diet when living in a food desert.

Eating healthily might be hard for some people. Eating healthily while living in a food desert can be even harder. Since childhood, we have heard how important it is to eat healthy foods and limit “junk” food. We are told that healthy foods can help us stay strong, prevent disease and live longer. But what happens when healthy food is hard to find, too expensive or too far away?

There is a lot of advice about what we should eat. There is less advice about how to eat healthily when getting healthy food is a challenge. First, it is important to understand what a food desert is. A food desert is an area where people have limited access to



KATHY KOLASA

healthy and affordable food. Another term is “food swamp.” A food swamp is an area where there are many fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, but fewer healthy food choices. Living in these areas can make healthy eating much harder.

For many people in small, rural towns, finding healthy food is only one part of the problem. Transportation can also be a major barrier. Many rural communities have limited or no public transportation or ride-sharing options. For some people, the closest grocery store may be 15 or more miles away. Getting there may depend on having a reliable car. If a car breaks down or gas prices go up, getting to the grocery store can become even harder. People may have to buy food from convenience stores, where healthy choices may be limited.

The cost of food can also make healthy eating difficult. This can be especially true for people living on a fixed income, which includes many people living in small towns. Many people have to choose food based on what they can afford. Often, less healthy and highly processed foods appear to cost less than healthier options.

Eastern North Carolina has

many small towns that may be considered food deserts, food swamps or both. Limited access to healthy foods may also play a role in some of the health problems seen in these communities, including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and obesity. For this reason, it is important to know how to make healthy choices even when healthy foods are not easy to find.

Eating healthily when grocery store trips happen only once or twice a month may seem impossible. However, there are ways to make it easier:

- Frozen and canned fruits and vegetables can be good choices, and canned options are available at many convenience stores. They can cost less than fresh food and last much longer. When buying frozen fruits and vegetables, look for options without added sugar, sauces or salt when possible. For canned foods, look for vegetables labeled “low sodium” or “no salt added.” If you can’t get low sodium, rinse the vegetables. For canned fruit, choose options packed in water or their own juice instead of heavy syrup. Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables can also be added to foods you already make. Try adding them to soups, stews, casseroles, rice dishes or pasta. This can help stretch a meal and provide more servings.
- Planning grocery trips can

also help. If transportation is a problem, consider going shopping with a friend, family or church member, or neighbor. Sharing a ride can make getting to the grocery store easier and may help save money on gas. Shop for meals for as many days as you can afford. Check the price of home delivery; it may be less than a taxi fee.

- Look for affordable recipes that use shelf food. Look for recipes that use foods you can afford and easily find. We found that the Dollar General website has recipes made from ingredients found in their stores. If you don’t have a computer, ask someone to get them for you. Visit dollargeneral.com/ch/better-for-you/entrees.
- Check local farmers markets and produce stands. These markets may offer fresh fruit and vegetables. In eastern North Carolina, examples include the Leroy James Farmers Market in Greenville and the New Bern Farmers Market in New Bern.
- Food pantries can also help. Many local and mobile food pantries offer fresh and nonperishable foods at little or no cost. Use the Food Finder app to find information about food pantries to find the closest free foods. If you don’t have a smartphone or don’t know how to use an app, ask a friend for help and/or ask them to search online for you. Some

mobile food pantries also travel to different counties across eastern North Carolina. One example is Ripe for Revival, which provides fresh foods and allows customers to pay what they can. See their schedule at ripeforrevival.com/pages/mobile-market-schedule (you have to scroll down a bit).

- Make the most of the choices you have. Sometimes eating at a fast-food restaurant cannot be avoided. When that happens, look for healthier choices on the menu. Choosing grilled foods, fruits, vegetables or water instead of sugary drinks can be a simple way to make a healthier choice.
- Growing food at home is another option. Even a small backyard garden can provide fresh vegetables and herbs. If you do not have space for a garden, plan to look for a community garden in your area for next season.

Living in a food desert can make healthy eating more difficult, but it does not make it impossible. Planning ahead, using local resources and making the healthiest choices available can help. Small changes can add up and help people and families work toward better health.

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Blazing new hiking trails: ‘Grey Beard’ reclaims record

At 91, Dale Sanders is oldest hiker to complete the Appalachian Trail

HOLLY RAMER AND ROBERT F. BUKATY
Associated Press

MILLINOCKET, Maine — More than 14 million older adults fall every year in the U.S., perhaps none so often as 91-year-old Dale Sanders.

By his count, Sanders fell 71 times while reclaiming his record as the oldest hiker to complete the Appalachian Trail. Six were what he calls hard falls, including one that led to a brief hospitalization and another just 200 yards from the finish. But none were enough to permanently divert him from the 2,193-mile trail that runs between Springer Mountain in Georgia and Mount Katahdin in Maine.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy defines a thru-hike as completing all of the trail’s sections in any order within a year, allowing for pauses. Sanders started Sept. 6 in West Virginia, hopscotched around with some brief breaks and finished Monday atop Maine’s highest peak, where he paused to pray at the sign marking the summit.

“I had to thank God, and I had to thank my support team and everybody that got me here,” he said.

A LONG-PLANNED COMEBACK

Sanders, whose trail name is Grey Beard, first set the Appalachian Trail record in 2017 at age 82. Four years later, his 83-year-old friend M.J. Eberhart, aka Nimblewill Nomad, took the title. But within months, Sanders announced his comeback plan.

While Sanders’ first journey was easier than he expected, the latest was considerably harder. Despite six months of training, he said he wasn’t in the best condition when he returned to the trail.

“And even today, I feel that I should probably be in better shape than I am,” he said last month. “But I just have to always go back and say, ‘But I am 91, so I’m blazing new ground hiking



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Dale Sanders, 91, climbs a section of Mt. Katahdin on Monday in Baxter State Park in Piscataquis County, Maine.

long distances like this.”

In June, Sanders was descending Killington Mountain in central Vermont when he fell forward in a boulder field, scraping his legs, arms and hands.

“Thank God nothing got broken, but I was banged up,” he said. “I didn’t rub the blood off; I just kept hiking.”

Weeks later, his left arm went numb and he ended up at a Maine hospital. What doctors initially feared was a stroke turned out to be a pinched nerve, but though he was soon cleared to resume hiking, he considered giving up.

He returned home to Tennessee in early August to be with his wife, whose mother had just died, and she convinced him to press on.

HIS MISSION CHANGED ALONG THE WAY

Some of Sanders’ best days were in Pennsylvania, where he enjoyed well-maintained trails and treats delivered by “trail angels.”

“When people are taking

care of you and bringing you caramel frappes on the trail, the rocks don’t matter,” he said.

In fact, Sanders has become something of a star among fellow hikers. Thousands more follow him on social media, which surprised Sanders and caused him to expand his mission beyond reclaiming his record.

“I wanna get it back, but right now, that’s secondary,” he said. “Right now, what’s the most important thing — and it’s one of the things that surprised me — is that people are motivated and given encouragement by my efforts.”

Meredith Ewenson, who met Sanders in June while leading a hike in New Hampshire for 10 other women, said he embodied not just the idea that anything is possible, but that the journey matters most.

“Seeing it in real life is something that I’ll definitely remember forever,” she said.

Ewenson said her group spotted Sanders early in the morning, but it wasn’t until he blazed by them hours

later that they saw the Grey Beard logo on his T-shirt and realized who he was. They caught up with him that night at an Appalachian Mountain Club hut, arriving around 4 p.m.

“I got here at noon,” he told them.

The next morning, she and others cheered as Sanders performed a “victory dance” before setting off again.

“My first thought was ‘Wow, his mobility is insane,’” Ewenson said. “His face on that body just doesn’t make any sense. My brain couldn’t compute how he was so impossibly fit for being that age.”

OFF-TRAIL ADVENTURES

Sanders was born in Kentucky in 1935, two years before the Appalachian Trail was completed. Bullied as a child for his small size,

he gained confidence in solo sports like acrobatics and swimming. He later served in the Navy and retired in 2002 after a long career in parks and recreation.

Sanders holds numerous other age-related records, including becoming the oldest person to paddle the entire length of the Mississippi River, an 87-day trip he started on his 87th birthday.

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