



Your guide to getting started with delicious and nutritious choices in state and local parks.



Eat Smart in Parks Toolkit

University of Missouri Extension



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Healthy communities start in our parks and neighborhoods

Missouri is blessed with one of the best state park systems in the country, as well as a wealth of municipal parks.

Thousands of visitors come to the parks each year to enjoy a wide range of recreational activities. While our parks are a valuable resource for children and adults to maintain and improve their health through exercise and recreation, the high-calorie, ultra-processed, salty foods served at some parks can quickly negate the benefits of being outside and moving more. By making healthy options available at food service operations, parks can have a positive impact on their patrons' diets. Because of the vast number of visitors to Missouri parks every year, simply having healthier choices available in the parks can go a long way towards improving health in Missouri. Eat Smart in Parks (ESIP) is a statewide effort aimed at promoting healthier eating options in state and local parks.

In interviews at state and municipal parks, about one-third of visitors said they brought food from outside the park because they wanted to eat healthier food that wasn't, or didn't appear to be, available in the parks. For this reason, the Department of Natural Resources, the Missouri Council for Activity and Nutrition, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, and the Missouri Parks and Recreation Association collaborated to develop and refine this Eat Smart in Parks guide. Included are model nutrition guidelines that reflect some of the best information from leading health organizations, including the National Academy of Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, along with marketing and promotion strategies for new, healthy options. See pages 6-7 for a complete description of these guidelines.

Municipal parks across the state have worked with ESIP to offer fresh, flavorful foods to patrons that are good for them, too. Maximizing profit while controlling costs is a crucial part of the equation for food service operations. Strategies for keeping costs low, profit margins high, and increasing the popularity of healthy food are offered in this guide.

We hope you use some of the strategies in this guide to expand the food choices in your parks and we welcome any comments or questions on how to make it happen. You may contact us or learn more about the project at <http://extension.missouri.edu/n2051/>

David Kelly: Director at Missouri State Parks

Gary Gates: Executive Director at Missouri Parks and Recreation Association



What is Eat Smart in Parks?

Eat Smart in Parks (ESIP) is a statewide effort aimed at promoting healthier eating options in Missouri's state and local parks. This effort includes the development of model Eat Smart in Parks nutrition standards that guide parks in serving healthier options, training for state and local parks to assist them with using the guidelines, and materials to promote healthier items. Since Eat Smart in Parks began in 2011, there is growing interest in ways parks and other places of recreation can offer fresh, flavorful foods to visitors that are good for them, too.

Led by individuals from University of Missouri Extension, Missouri State Parks, Missouri Parks and Recreation Association (MPRA), the Missouri Council for Activity and Nutrition (MOCAN) and the Health Communication Research Center, the Eat Smart in Parks team has worked across the state. Numerous parks have actively participated in the ESIP program, while other parks have taken elements of Eat Smart in Parks to apply on their own. In each case, parks are given the tools and resources they need to succeed, and there are no mandates or costs to participate in the program.

ESIP participants can receive free assistance with a variety of activities including:

- Customer research and tailored reports
- Menu analysis
- Taste tests
- Healthy product identification and sourcing
- Contract assistance
- Marketing materials
- Healthy food incentive ideas

If you are interested in joining ESIP, please contact Jollyn Tyryfter at jtyryfter@missouri.edu today!



According to a study conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)...

67%

of Americans agree it's important that vending machines and concession stands in public spaces include healthy food and drink options. [1]

74%

of millennials are strong believers in accessing these healthy options. 70% of Gen Xers believe in this as well. [1]

Missouri's Model for Eat Smart in Parks

Parks are often the first places where children and youth learn to play a sport, ride a bike, or cast a line. Parks are also where children and youth can learn to start making healthy choices when choosing a snack, drink, or meal. But parks must offer these items in their food service operations first.

To help parks begin to identify healthy menu choices, partners from across the state, including Missouri State Parks, MOCAN, and MPRA, along with representatives from state and local parks, concessionaires and health advocates, developed healthy model guidelines for concessions in Missouri parks. Found on page 6, these nutrition guidelines help you set a standard for the foods and drinks offered in your parks. The guidelines contain measures that can help boost the availability of healthy choices at parks. By adopting these nutritional and marketing standards, Missouri can become a front-runner in championing great parks, great food and great park experiences.

Written in plain language, these nutritional guidelines are designed for park staff and others who are interested in offering tastier, healthy foods. Food groups are broken down into categories: Fruits, Vegetables, Grains, Dairy and Proteins as well as Beverages. Recommendations are made for serving sizes, as well as the highest thresholds for fat, sugar and sodium. Moreover, the policy guidelines consider revenues by offering recommendations for signage, display and pricing of items.

While the model guidelines are intended for any park in Missouri, we know that each park is unique. Your park may be able to initially offer a few healthy items, or it may be possible to fully implement the model guidelines.

For example, your park might decide to begin by...

- Placing at least one healthy item or meal on the children's menu
- Adding a new healthy item to the menu each season
- Posting the calorie content of each menu item

Educating or training staff on the food service changes is a great first step. Making the overall objective of the food service changes clear and visible by posting it in kitchens or concession stands will help staff stay on the same page, especially in high turnover locations.

You may also want to include the staff in the planning healthy menu changes to let them know that their ideas are valuable and to increase cooperation.

We know that for many parks, this is a brand new undertaking, but you are not alone. We are available to provide support and guidance for park concessionaires who embark on this journey toward better health. We are here to help and connect you with other people or resources as you get started.



Eat Smart in Parks Guidelines

The following recommendations are based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Federal Food Service guidelines. These have been updated to reflect 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In general, park food service operations should strive to comply with the food group and preparation suggestions below. At least 50% of the FOODS offered meet all of the following nutrition standards:

Fruits

- Offer at least one fresh, canned, dried or frozen fruit daily.
- All canned or frozen fruit should be packaged in 100% water or unsweetened juice, with no added sweeteners.

Vegetables

- Offer at least one fresh, canned or frozen vegetable daily.
- Vegetables should be served raw, steamed, baked or grilled, seasoned without added fat or oil.

Grains

- Offer 100% whole grain products such as cereal, bread, rice and pasta.

Dairy

- Offer nonfat dairy or dairy-alternative products such as yogurt, cheese and pudding.

Proteins

- Offer low fat and unprocessed options such as lean meats, poultry, fish or vegetarian options.
- Protein options should be baked, broiled, grilled or boiled without added fat or oil.

Calories

- **Snacks/Side Items**
 - No more than 250 calories per item.
- **Entrees**
 - No more than 500 calories per item.

Fat

- No more than 35% of calories from total fat.
- No more than 10% calories from saturated fat.
 - 0 gm trans fat (< 0.5/serving).
- Snack mixes with nuts and other foods aren't exempt from the 35% fat limit.
- Allowed: nuts, seeds, nut butters and low fat cheese without added fat or caloric sweeteners.

Sugar

- No more than 35% of calories from added sugar.
- Allowed: fruits or vegetables without added sugar or caloric sweeteners.

Sodium

- **Snacks/Side Items**
 - 230 mg or less per serving.
- **Entrees**
 - 600 mg or less per serving.
 - 800 mg or less for total meal.

Eat Smart in Parks Guidelines

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BEVERAGES

Water

- Unflavored, non-carbonated and no additives are available in all food service venues.

Milk

- Nonfat and/or low-fat (1% or 0.5%) milk or milk alternative with no added sugars.
- Milk contains no more than 200 calories per container.

Fruit Juice

- 100% (liquid or frozen) juice with no added sweeteners in containers of 8 ounces or less.

Vegetable Juice

- 100% vegetable juice with no added sweeteners.
- 230 mg or less of sodium per container.

Calories/Portion Size

- Less than 40 calories per 8 fluid ounces or less.

Other

- Energy drinks are not sold.

FOODS AND BEVERAGES

For ALL FOODS and BEVERAGES

- Items that meet the standards will be as visible or more visible to customers as items that do not meet the standards.
- Items that meet the standards must be sold at a price equivalent to or lower than similar items that do not meet the standards.

Labeling

- When possible display nutrition information for each product, especially calories, fat, saturated fat and sodium.
- When possible display the MyPlate logo to remind customers about eating a healthy meal.

Placement

- Consider placing items that meet the nutrition guidelines within the top third of the vending machine so they are more visible.

Planning your success

Before implementing any guidelines, consider these steps.

Step 1: Get approval

You may need permission or approval from a supervisor, a city council or another decision maker before you implement any changes. Having the conversation early will help with your planning process. You may also want to create support for your program by involving others who are interested in providing healthy food choices, such as a representative from your local health department.

Step 2: Assess your current menu

Take a look at what you currently offer on your menus and in your vending machines. Using the nutrition guidelines you can determine how your current food and beverage choices stack up against the nutrition recommendations.

Check out our menu assessment tool available in the appendix and online at www.extension.missouri.edu. Your local University of Missouri Health and Nutrition Specialist may also help with this step. To find your local Extension Specialist go to www.extension.missouri.edu and search the menu under *MU Extension near you*, or call 573-882-2399

Step 3: Assess past and current sales

Whether you track sales with a cash box, inventory or point-of-sale system, it is important to know how much revenue your concession stand generates and how that money is used.

If the concession revenues support core park functions, such as salaries for multiple personnel, making slow gradual changes may be more advisable than completing an entire concession operation makeover. Similarly, knowing which concession items are most popular can help guide you in decisions about which menu items to alter or eliminate.

Common questions to consider when assessing your operations include:

- Who visits your park and food service operation?
- What seasonal activities happen in your park?
- What skills do your staff have?
- What does your concessions area look like?
- Do you have the space and equipment needed to store and prepare different food?

Step 4: Assess your customers

Ask your customers their opinions about potential concession stand changes. Collecting this information can be done in a variety of ways, from simply posting a poster board in the park and asking patrons to share their thoughts to conducting a survey online or in person. See the appendix for a sample survey. Along with asking questions, observe what they may bring into the park themselves. Some parks prohibit outside food and drinks, but others do not or are liberal in enforcing these rules. By observing the snacks and drinks your customers bring to the park, you can gauge potential interest in the types of items they prefer, too. The University of Missouri Extension website has an observation sheet that you can use to record your findings.

Step 5: Identify your definition of success

Having a big picture and a specific goal in mind can help you stay focused when it seems like there is too much to try or change. Find ways your park can meet that goal and break them down into smaller activities to keep motivation up.

For instance, one Missouri park wanted to offer at least one healthy item from each menu category (a drink, a snack and a meal). Another park wanted to be able to offer a healthy grilled chicken sandwich but wasn't sure it would sell well. Through taste tests and sales data, the park now is able to offer the sandwich during adult league games when the product moves well and generates profit.

By naming your definition of success and determining how you will assess it, you can begin to develop a strategy that can meet park operations needs and customers' desires for healthy, tasty products.

Step 6: Select healthy items

You can make changes in a variety of ways including:

- Substituting products that meet the guidelines for popular menu items, such as low-fat nacho cheese sauce in place of regular sauce.
- Adding healthier items to the menu. Fresh fruits and vegetables are a safe bet.
- Replace unhealthy items with a healthy choice, such as replacing French fries with apple slices and dip.
- Featuring a healthy option for a short time to determine if it will sell.
- Bundle healthy items with other products to create a healthier combo meal. For example, replace chips or fries on your Kids Meal with veggies sticks or apple slices and offer water or juice instead of soda.

Many park staff in Missouri have reported success when starting with small changes. Small decisions and changes can ease your operation into healthier menu items.



A Special Word About Fresh Items

Perishable items can be used in park concessions with a little planning and training.

- Select fruit that can be repurposed. If grapes or bananas don't sell fresh try them frozen or in a smoothie.
- Try serving fresh fruit and veggies with dips or sauces such as peanut butter or low fat ranch dip.
- If space is limited, see if a local market or grocery can supply small quantities of fresh items to sell.

Step 7: Pilot test items with consumers

Everyone likes to try it out before they buy. Do the same with new menu items or modifications of existing products with your visitors. Some vendors offer taste tests during high-traffic events, such as tournaments. Others offer a free sample on a specific day of the week, such as "Taste it Tuesdays!" The key is to determine what your visitors seem to like and what they are willing to buy. Use the results of the customer surveys from Step 4 to select items to taste test. Ask your staff members to record what people say or what they enjoy the most. Having that information will let you to make the best decisions for your operation. A survey to capture customers' opinions about the new items can be found in the Appendix.

As a word of caution: After a successful taste test for a new item the work is not done. Parks still need to promote the new item once it is listed on the menu.

Several parks have reported adding a new healthy item but sales fell flat. In each of those cases, park patrons reported not knowing that something new was available, even when the item was clearly pointed out to them on the menu. Putting up new signs or banners in and around the park, new menus or using a small sign attached to a shelf (“shelf talkers”), can help educate customers who may not ‘see’ the new item(s) listed.

Step 8: Educate staff, foster staff buy-in

Staff matter and employee buy-in is an important and sometimes overlooked step in the implementation of any program. Staff that do not feel committed to the program may, for example, over-serve portions of less healthy food or discourage healthy selections. If staff don’t see the importance of healthier food, they may be less likely to comply with recommending the fresh fruit or baked chicken over the French fries or candy bar. This is one reason why it is important to include staff in the planning phase. Staff need to know that their opinions and insight are valuable. Some food service operations offer contests, where a server who sells the most of a particular healthy food item receives a prize at the end of the week.

In addition to enthusiasm-raising activities, the nutritional policies and logic behind them should be part of the standard training for staff. Staff training is important so your employees have the knowledge, skills and tools to prepare and serve food choices that are nutritious and delicious. The training can also cover ways that staff can help visitors select these healthy products. If you do not currently offer training, you can contact your local Extension Nutrition Specialist to help you get started.



Step 9: Market healthy option

Offering healthier menu items is only one step in the process of improving the health of park patrons. Let customers know that you have added new healthy products. This might mean doing more than simply adding the new item to the menu. Frequently, park customers are in a hurry and may not fully read a list of items. To catch their attention, parks have tried a variety of fun and novel ways to get them to take notice. From low-cost yard signs, to large-scale kickoff events, parks have been working to let customers know that something different is happening at the concession stand. The key to remember is that changing the culture of the parks and the mindsets of visitors requires the use of multiple strategies.



Different tastes but similar needs

Since Eat Smart in Parks began, we have collected over 1,200 surveys from park customers from across the state. In that time, we have learned that most customers prefer:

- Fresh cut fruit
- Quick and easy snacks
- Frozen grapes
- Trail mix or granola bars
- Sliced apples with caramel



Finding healthy products

Many partners can help if they know what you need.

- A food service distributor can help you identify the products they carry that will meet the guidelines. Ask for products that meet the USDA Smart Snacks requirements as distributors are typically very familiar with these guidelines. However, be sure to check the sugar in the distributor's products, as the USDA and Eat Smart in Parks guidelines are different for this nutrient. For perishable products such as fresh fruits and vegetables, consider splitting cases between parks to move the products more quickly and reduce the risk of product spoilage.
- Try looking for products at buying clubs. Increasingly these businesses carry healthier items that can be purchased in smaller quantities than are often available from food service distributors.
- Consider convenience store distributors. Many convenience stores now offer healthier options including fresh fruit and vegetables. Distributors that serve these stores may also be willing to provide you perishable product in smaller quantities that can be sold before they spoil.
- Ask your local grocery store about packaging fresh products that meet your needs. Many grocery stores now have individual servings of fresh fruit, yogurt and cheese/veggie/fruit packs for sale.
- You don't have to be a nutritionist or dietitian. Try contacting your local Extension Nutrition Specialist for assistance in analyzing products.



How do you determine if an item meets the guidelines?

The guidelines are listed on pages 6-7. Eat Smart in Parks developed a menu assessment tool you can use to determine if an item meets the guidelines. To access the tool, please visit [MU Extension website](#).

Marketing can make the difference



While most parks don't have marketing budgets, it doesn't mean that marketing isn't important. From our work and feedback from parks around the state, we have identified some proven ideas for marketing healthy options in your park that don't break the bank.

Menu Signs

From high-end menu signs to paper-based print outs, menu signs are the main way customers learn what's available and what they could order. Take advantage of the space and consider how your menu looks and where items are placed. Retailers often put popular or high-priced items at eye-level or in the other easy to see places. There are many ways to use this concept to promote sales of healthy food and/or make unhealthy food less attractive.

- Place a menu sign for healthy food items at eye level. Do the opposite for menus with less healthy food; place it above eye level, especially children's eye level.
 - Use large, brightly colored signs for healthy food. Highlight healthier items on menus with decals, larger font sizes, different colors, drawing a box around a healthy item, or placing them on the right-hand side of the menu. Our eyes are attracted to large type, bright colors and often the right side of a book or magazine.
 - Pictures will help sell product. There are many free pictures that can be found using creative commons or you can take the photos yourself. The main goal is to make your menu items look as good as they taste.
 - Use the Eat Smart in Parks logo on menus, as well as your signs, flyers, banners and posters. This logo lets customers easily see the healthy eating choices available in your park. For customers who are familiar with ESIP, it will readily tell them that your park has healthy, tasty items worth trying.
 - Group menu items as a meal. Parks will frequently group healthy menu items with a water, making a fast 'meal deal' that customers can quickly name and purchase at the counter. These meals can be promoted by the ESIP pocket sign or another menu of your choosing. (Find ESIP's pocket sign at extension.missouri.edu).
 - Consider creating two separate menus, one with healthy options and the other with less healthy options.
- Post the healthy menu in a more prominent location. Many parks have adopted this strategy and found success.
 - Eliminate the promotion of less-healthy items such as sugar-sweetened beverages in your park. These promotions can take many forms including menu signs and banners that are often provided to the park for free.
 - Place menu reminders, such as posters, banners and flyers around the park where patrons typically find park information such as on bulletin boards and the back of bathroom door stalls.
 - If you are sourcing local products, highlight them in menu offering. Instead of a "Veggie Plate" that features local carrots, cucumbers and peppers with a hummus or healthy dip, try a catchier name like the "Ozark Sampler."





Promote healthy items at the point-of-sale

There's a reason why checkout lines from groceries to office supply stores have candy, gum and other items at the cashier lane -because it sells those products. Put less healthy items, such as candy behind the counter, out of the customers' sight. Conversely, put healthy items and their photos in prominent locations where they will be seen first.

- Train staff to call attention to new products at point-of-sale or have them wear a button or hat that calls attention to Eat Smart in Parks or your healthy new menu items.
- Try a mobile cart or concession stand that can move between park ball fields. Sometimes customers may be watching or participating in a game that is far from the concession stand. A mobile cart, concession stand or even a roving park staffer can help drive sales and let your customers know what's on the menu.

Web and social media send clear messages

The number of people using smart phones to search for information grows each year. Using your website and other social media channels can help drive awareness among various groups, from parents and coaches to teens and grandparents.

- Promote your healthy items on social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and instagram.
- Post your concession menu on your park's website.
- Email your new concession menu to patrons who have signed up for programs or leagues that will use the facility where the new menu is offered.
- Be sure to inform your community partners and stakeholders such as parents, coaches, schools, city administrators and the health department so that they can support your efforts, too.

Need a poster, flyer or other ESIP marketing item?

You can download poster, letters to coaches and parents, stickers and more from the Eat Smart in Parks campaign at <https://extension.missouri.edu/programs/healthy-concessions/eat-smart-in-parks/>

What's on the menu?

From the Missouri parks that have already begun to offer healthy food choices, we have collected a few popular ideas that you might want to try:

- 100% frozen fruit juice
- Air popped or low-fat popcorn
- Apples, oranges or bananas
- Baked potatoes with salsa
- Broccoli and low fat ranch dressing
- Corn on the cob
- Fruit/nut/cheese snack packs
- Dry roasted nuts
- Frozen grapes and bananas
- Grilled chicken or fish
- Hummus and pretzels
- Low-fat yogurt
- Sliced apples with peanut butter and low-fat caramel
- Smoothies made with low-fat yogurt and 100% fruit juice
- Steamed or grilled vegetables
- Watermelon

For education and outreach to park visitors, you can try a number of low-cost marketing strategies including placing information about healthy choices under the glass tops of tables or along counter tops.

Some parks have also tied sustainable food education to waste management education, discussing improvements the park has made in going "greener" and asking visitors to be good environmental stewards, too. No matter which tip or idea you try, the key to remember is that a small step toward healthy options is most important.



Even in tight spaces, menus can be formatted to call attention to healthy options at a concession stand. Left: A menu from a Moberly park before highlighting the Eat Smart in Parks food options. Right: A modified menu highlighting Eat Smart options in green. In the new menu, healthy options have been moved to the top of each category and candy is listed as the very last option.



Raising Awareness

Social media is great, but there are other tried and true tactics, too. Some Missouri parks have had great success with the following tips.

- Kick-off events. A grand opening or launch event is a great way to highlight a new healthy food policy; however, it's best to have piloted new products prior to the kick-off event. Be sure to notify your local media.
- Keep it fresh by introducing new items. Just like fashion, popular foods go through trends. When the novelty begins to wear off, adding new items can revitalize the healthy effort.
- Cooking or gardening demonstrations are valuable tools for selling the public and staff on healthier food. Check with your local health department for advice on setting up food demos.
- Weekly specials or incentives on concession stand items can help promote new items. Some parks have reduced prices on a healthy snack to encourage trying it out and drive sales.
- Offer prize drawings. For example, every time someone orders a healthy item from the menu, his or her name could be entered in a drawing at end of week. Prizes could be pool passes or coupons for another healthy item.
- Encourage good behavior. Some parks have used a loyal customer or repeat buyer punch-card system for their healthy items. Parks can foster repeat buyers by implementing a "buy 10 healthy items and get the 11th free" incentive.
- Fliers and banners can be posted or distributed in the park and the community. Check with your local civic partners for additional marketing opportunities to display these banners and distribute flyers as well. Parks sometimes display their Eat Smart banners during park movie nights. While not directly related, this event and others like them, represent times when potential park patrons can learn about new menu options.
- Organize a meal at the park where local farmers and chefs prepare healthy, affordable meals to highlight new ways to prepare fruits and vegetables. Lexington, Kentucky parks hosted a very successful event, charging \$10 for adults and \$5 for children. University of Missouri Extension Nutrition Specialists may be able put you in touch with chefs or other Nutrition Specialists to help plan an event.
- If you buy local food, let the visitors know that they're supporting local family farms with their purchase. Even better, put a picture of the farmer on your menu.

Implementation Ideas

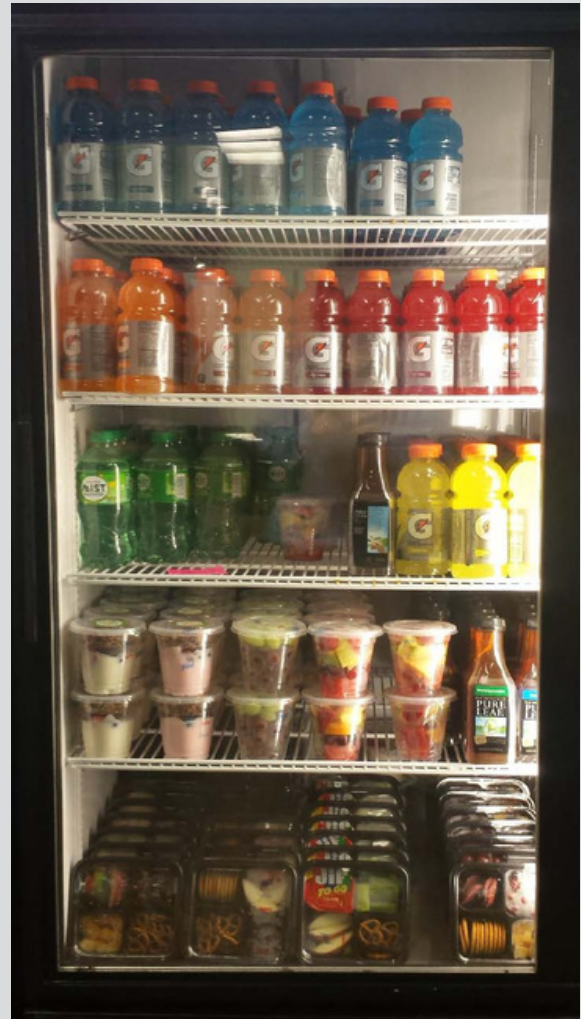
#1 Support your local farmer

Many Missourians feel a close tie to the land. In recent years, the push to buy local and support local farmers has given new hope to family farms. Because fresh, local produce has a host of benefits, providing healthier food in Missouri parks and supporting local farmers can be accomplished at the same time. Learn more about area growers through the Missouri Department of Agriculture's (<https://agriculture.mo.gov/>) AgEbb fruit and veggie grower listing.

Parks with successful local food programs have used opportunities to educate visitors about the benefits of eating local. This education can take the form of signage at restaurants or concession stands promoting local food, local farmers who source their food and many more ideas. Parks can often develop a local farmers' market by opening up a vacant or less-used parking lot during early-morning or off-peak hours. This strategy can be an important service to local farmers who may not know if there is a market for their products, and it can help attract visitors to your park. However, before marketing local foods to park customers, be sure to check with your local health department first. Some municipalities and counties have local rules or ordinances that require special handling of local produce. Check with your local agencies to ensure your activities are in compliance with local rules.

#2 Maintaining the profit margin

Understandably, many parks are concerned with how menu changes might impact operations. Cost control and maintaining profit margin are important concerns when changing a menu, but it's an achievable goal. According to Nemours Health and Prevention Service, "Several studies have shown, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agree, that children will purchase healthful options and that schools and other organizations can increase their profit margins [by making healthy food available]" [2].



Here are some of the proven ways to contain costs:

Reduce the cost of healthy food items

Let's face it, a dollar only goes so far. And whether park visitors bring their food or buy it, the price has to be right. When healthy food is sold at higher prices, this creates a disincentive, and visitors may resort to buying unhealthy food. Price adjustments can be made to make cost work in your favor. This may mean raising the price of unhealthy food. For example, raising the price of a soda to \$1.50, while charging a \$1.00 for bottled water is a proven strategy for increasing water sales. Raising the prices on some food items is a useful strategy to offset the sometimes lower profit margin of healthier food. Contracts with soft drink companies can be a barrier to adjusting prices. Some state park systems have found it useful to include the companies as part of the conversation about improving the health of park visitors. They may have healthier items to offer, or can work with you under a new park policy.

Portion Control

Reducing the portion size of unhealthy food can both reduce the amount of calories eaten and increase the profit margin. This is a great strategy for Missouri parks. Smaller cups and plates can reduce portion size, saving calories and money while reducing waste. Smaller cups and plates make portions appear generous. Likewise, concessionaires can make portions consistent to control costs and keep customers happy. It is important to designate the appropriate portion size and provide staff the equipment and training needed to serve the same size portion every time. Serving portions larger than the designated size uses product more quickly which reduces profit margin. Inconsistent portions can also lead to dissatisfied customers if they notice they are served smaller portions than others.

Specifying portion sizes, then posting the visual for staff, can help keep portion sizes consistent. Using calibrated serving utensils such as spoodles and portion control cups make serving consistent portion sizes easy. Serving pre-portioned or individual serving size items can save time but it is very important to read the nutrition label to verify that the item contains only one serving and that it meets the guidelines. Potato chips for example are often sold in a variety of “individual” sizes but the larger packages typically have more than one serving.



Left: Portion control can also be implemented by changing the form of the food you are serving. Pretzel bites can replace the large traditional pretzel portion. Right: Youth love fresh fruit in the cut fruit cups.

Keeping it local

Buying from local farmers can reduce the price of fresh food. The food does not have to be shipped as far, or stored as long before shipment. Initially, local farmers may have less capacity to provide fresh food on a large scale. However, any change in the purchase of local food will help enlarge the market for farmers.

Planting health

Not all parks need to look outside their land for fresh, local produce. Planting gardens for produce in the park can be a cost-efficient solution and draw attention to the park's commitment to good health. On-site gardens could be particularly helpful in rural areas where finding local food sources can be a challenge.

Healthy food is always cheaper when in-season

The cost of local, fresh food is the lowest when it is abundant and in-season. It is also typically a time when parks are the busiest. Using a seasonal menu is a great way to take advantage of increased visitor traffic and good prices.

Hidden healthy

Some parks have found that when they have introduced healthier food items, the least healthy items continue to be top sellers. While strategies for promoting healthy items play a vital role, making changes to the least healthy items can be beneficial. For example, switching oils, using less oil, baking instead of frying or switching to lower fat/lower sugar salad dressings can all help.

Scott A. Davis, CPRP, former Richmond Heights Deputy Director of Parks and Recreation said, “We completely eliminated two fryers that we had been using for the last 7-10 years. We saw more sales of better food, faster than with the fryers. It can cook the exact same French fries we were using in 1:10 seconds, as opposed to 4:30 seconds fried. Now they are oven baked/air fried without any additional oil. You are able to cook anything you could cook in a fryer, oven or microwave in the TurboChef.”

Making healthy the only choice

Some parks have adopted a 100% healthy vending or concessions policy, only offering options that adhere to healthy food guidelines, and have seen an increase in profit as a result. An evaluation of a Chicago Parks District policy that applied nutrition standards to 100% of vending machine foods in field houses found that the overall monthly average sales per machine increased from \$84 in June 2011 to \$371 in August 2012. While this is not a typical outcome, most organizations report neutral overall revenue impact, or even modest increases over baseline. [3]

This strategy may be most effective when used with a “captive crowd,” for example, swimming pool concession stands where outside food and drinks are prohibited, areas where there are few other nearby food options, or for young children. Often in the summer, parks give parents a safe place to send young children who need to cool off and be active. Many of the children are permitted entry to the pools alone or are supervised by older siblings who can’t drive yet. These youth are likely going to stay put for several hours and will need to buy what’s at the concession stand. Making healthy items the easy and only choice for these youth can be a win-win for parks and parents.

#3 Renegotiating contracts

A window of opportunity may be created when concession or vending contracts are up for negotiation. The parks department will have an opportunity to create a new prospectus giving preference to concessionaires or vendors who can provide healthier, more sustainable locally grown foods. Writing a prospectus that calls for healthier food practices will attract vendors who are more committed to the ideas, or know that they have to adapt to this philosophy in order to win the bid. Large vendors have adapted to the USDA’s Smart Snacks school nutrition program and now offer a larger variety of healthy and attractive options. Finding new suppliers takes a lot of diligence. Park decision makers may need to seek out new local partners as sources. In the case of a café in Golden Gate National Park, the company who won the bid partnered with a local bakery who shared a commitment to organic, local food, and another local business that provided organic meat, cheese and produce [2]. It took time and effort to find local partners, as some businesses did not have the capacity or interest in accommodating the needs of the food service; however, both businesses grew as a result of the partnership.





Case Study: Pools Promote Healthy Eating and Living

Being the manager of six indoor and outdoor aquatic recreation centers, Janel Twehous has a unique opportunity to provide healthy food options to a large population. In Summer 2019, Little Mates Cove was her first facility to participate in the Eat Smart in Parks program.

Instead of trying to ease the transition of healthier food options into her concession stand, Twehous went all in from the very beginning.

"The goal of parks and recreation is health and fitness across the board ... we want to help in any way we can to provide people with the option to live a healthy lifestyle," says Twehous.

A Success Story from:

Janel Twehous

Recreation Supervisor

Columbia Parks and Recreation

Columbia, MO

Even though initial patron reactions were somewhat mixed, Twehous said she did not regret making the switch all at once. Many parents were grateful for the new food options for their children, with frozen mango pieces, frozen grapes and chicken sandwiches becoming some of the most popular items on the new menu. Overall, Twehous said she loved being able to provide healthier options for customers at her facilities and looked forward to experimenting with new options that the general public might also enjoy.

Twehous went on to say that part of what made the Eat Smart in Parks program so successful was the ability to advertise the new products throughout her facilities. Signs and posters around the different pools displayed healthier food options in open places where parents and kids alike could see them.

However, in light of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Twehous reports that her implementation of the Eat Smart in Parks program, as well as her facilities in general, have had to become much more flexible. In order to follow proper social distancing guidelines, only two aquatic facilities were able to stay open in summer of 2020. Furthermore, these two facilities had to work on a session schedule where people would reserve times to use the pool area, and the number of participants in different areas was limited. However, even with this limited capacity, Twehous says she was still able to successfully implement healthy food options into the concession stands.

In order to still be able to serve a variety of foods, while maintaining new public safety standards, using prepackaged or pre-prepared foods and condiments is essential. By limiting employee contact to food, as well as disinfecting frequently touched areas, the aquatic center staff is able to safely run the concession stands while also taking the best precautions to try and limit the spread of any illnesses.

In the end, Twehous stated that her long-term goal is to “stay flexible” throughout the pandemic.

“Nothing is guaranteed, we just have to keep moving forward and see where that takes us,” says Twehous.



Parks are critical partners in promoting healthy lifestyles.

We hope that some of these ideas and suggestions are useful to you now and in the future. Your commitment to increasing access to healthy food has never mattered more.

For additional information about the project, visit: extension.missouri.edu or contact Jollyn Tyryfter at jtyryfter@missouri.edu or 573-882-2399.

Healthy Concessions Model Policy

1.0 Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish Food Service Guidelines for minimum availability and display of healthy food items at concession stands at municipal parks and cafeteria operators on municipal property following the standards below.

2.0 Definitions

Default

- A pre-set menu option, i.e., a menu item that is automatically provided in the absence of a specific request by a consumer.

Lean Meat and Lean Poultry

- Any meat or poultry that contains less than 10 g of fat, 4.5 g or less of saturated fats, and less than 95 mg of cholesterol per 100 g and per labeled serving size, based on USDA definitions for food label use.

Low-Fat Dairy Products

- Dairy products (and dairy alternatives), such as milk, yogurt, cheese, and fortified soy beverages that meet FDA's nutrient claim definition for no-fat or low-fat.

Meal

- A meal consists of an entree and two side items.

Side Item

- A single serving of a food or beverage that may accompany a meal or entree or eaten on its own.

Variety

- A diverse assortment of foods and beverages across and within all food groups and subgroups selected to fulfill the recommended amounts without exceeding the limits for calories and other dietary components.

Whole Grain-Rich Products

- Contain 100 percent whole grain or a blend of whole-grain meal and/or flour and enriched meal and / or flour of which at least 50 percent is whole grain. The remaining 50 percent or less of grains, if any, must be enriched.

3.0 Foods

- 1) Concessions shall offer a minimum of one fruit option with no sugar added. Fruit can be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried.
- 2) Concessions shall offer a minimum of one non-fried vegetable option daily. Vegetables can be fresh, frozen, canned, raw or cooked.
- 3) Half of total grains served should be "whole-grain rich" products.
- 4) Concessions shall offer a variety of low-fat dairy or dairy-alternative products such as milk, yogurt, cheese or puddings.
- 5) Concessions shall offer a variety of non-fried protein sources such as lean meats, poultry, seafood, and vegetarian options
- 6) All meals offered should contain ≤ 800 mg of sodium per serving
- 7) All entrees offered should contain ≤ 600 mg of sodium per serving
- 8) All side items should contain ≤ 230 mg of sodium per serving

- 9) No items offered should have more than 35% of calories from total fat per serving.
 - a) Exemptions: nuts, seeds and nut/seed butters; and dried fruit with nuts/seeds with no added nutritive sweeteners or fats
- 10) No items offered should have more than 10% of calories from saturated fats per serving.
- 11) No foods should contain any partially hydrogenated oils (trans fats).
- 12) No more than one deep fried option should be offered per day.
- 13) No items offered should have more than 35% of calories from added sugars per serving.
 - a) Exemptions: Dried/dehydrated whole fruits or vegetables with no added nutritive sweeteners; dried whole fruits or pieces with nutritive sweeteners required for processing and/or palatability; and products consisting of only exempt dried fruit with nuts and/or seeds with no added nutritive sweeteners or fats.
- 14) Provide calorie and nutrition information of standard menu items whenever possible.

4.0 Beverages

- 1) Provide access to free portable water.
- 2) If juice is available, offer only 100% juice with no added sweeteners in containers of 8 oz or less.
- 3) If milk or milk alternatives are available, offer low-fat (1% or 0.5%) options with no added sugars.
- 4) At least 50% of available beverage choices contain \leq 40 calories per 8 fluid ounces (excluding 100% juice and unsweetened fat-free or low-fat (1% or 0.5%) milk).

5.0 Layout and Product Promotion

- 1) Strategically place foods and beverages and design the layout of food service venues to foster selection of healthier foods and beverages.
 - a) Place a menu sign for healthy food items at eye level.
 - b) Use large brightly-colored signs for healthy food.
 - c) Place healthier items near the top of the menu OR create a separate menu with healthy items, and display in a prominent location.
 - d) Place healthy food and beverages at eye level or other prime selling locations.
 - e) Train concessions staff to call attention to new products or point of-sale.
 - f) Eliminate the promotion of less-healthy items (such as sugar-sweetened beverages) around the park
- 2) Make healthier options and portions default choices.
 - a) Offer smaller portion size options (e.g. half-sandwiches, half-sized entrées, smaller beverage containers).
 - b) Make healthier items default options throughout the menu (e.g., serving fruit instead of chips or water instead of soda in combo meals).

6.0 Contracts

- 1) When concession or vending contracts are up for renegotiation, the prospectus will be created to give preference to concessionaires who will provide healthier foods.
- 2) When required to use promotional signs, banners, or other imagery, parks will promote and display only the healthiest option available from the vendor (e.g. bottled water or 100% juice instead of sugar sweetened beverages on banners and signs).

REFERENCES

- [1] National Recreation and Park Association. (2016). Providing healthy options in public spaces. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/park-pulse/park-pulse-survey-healthy-options-public-spaces/>
- [2] The Institute at the Golden Gate. Food for Parks. Retrieved from <https://www.parksconservancy.org/file/38541/download?token=5DjcEIBu>
- [3] Public Health Law Center. (2015, October). From Small Steps to Big Leaps: Promoting Healthy Food & Beverage Choices in Parks & Recreation Facilities. Retrieved from <https://publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/fs-healthy-food-bev-parks-rec-WEB.pdf.pdf>

Menu Assessment

Eat Smart in Parks (ESIP) Menu Assessment Tool

Eat Smart in Parks has created a Menu Assessment Tool to help analyze the nutrition content of foods and beverages and determine if they meet the Eat Smart in Parks nutrition guidelines.

Using the tool involves inputting information from the menu items' nutrition facts food labels into the Menu Assessment Tool spreadsheet. The graphic below shows where on the nutrition facts food label the needed information can be found. The graphic on the next page indicates specifically where on the tool this information should be placed.

Nutrition Facts	
3 servings per container	
Serving size	1 ounce (28g)
Amount Per Serving	
Calories	140
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 6g	8%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
<i>Trans</i> Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 110mg	5%
Total Carbohydrate 19g	7%
Dietary Fiber 2g	7%
Total Sugars 0g	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	0%
Protein 2g	4%
Not a significant source of vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium	
*The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	

A. Serving size



B. Calories per serving



C. Grams of fat



D. Saturated fat



E. Trans fat



F. Sodium



G. Added sugar



A Note on Serving Size

When entering the nutrition facts information into the tool, it is particularly important to pay attention to the serving size and the number of servings per container. In the above tortilla chip label, there are 3 servings in the package. If 1/3 of the package is served as part of an order of nachos, the calories, fat sodium and sugar information can be directly entered into the Menu Assessment Tool. However, if the entire package of chips is served in the nachos, the amount of calories, fat, sodium and sugar listed on the label must be multiplied by the number of servings per container, in this case three.

Menu Assessment Tool

1. Collect the nutrition facts labels for the items on the menu.
2. Using the tabs at the bottom of the Menu Assessment Tool, select the type of menu items to be assessed (entrees, side/snacks, beverages etc.)
3. Enter the menu items on the spreadsheet. Use the nutrition facts label for each menu item to enter: calories, grams of total fat, grams of saturated fat, grams of trans fat, grams of added sugar and milligrams of sodium for each item. The large red letters in each column correspond to where this information can be found on the nutrition facts label on the previous page. (See the previous page for a note about serving sizes to assure the correct figures are entered into the tool.)
4. The tool cells include formulas to determine if the numbers entered meet the Eat Smart in Parks guidelines. If the number entered does not meet the Eat Smart Guidelines then the cells on the tool will turn red and the item does not meet the Eat Smart in Parks Guidelines.

Snacks and side items

Name of park:	Test
Person(s) completing form:	Test
Date completed:	12/9/21

Food Item	Cost per item	Serving Size	Per serving (target measurements in parentheses)					
			Calories (≤ 250 cals)	Grams of fat	Grams of saturated fat	Grams of trans fat (0 g)	Grams of added sugar	Sodium (≤ 230mg)
EXAMPLE Chocolate coconut chips	\$ 1.50	1 oz	180	14	13	0	9	60
EXAMPLE Oatmeal	\$ 0.75	1 container	210	5	1	0	1	160
EXAMPLE Apple	\$ 0.75	1 apple	95	0	0	0	19	0

A B C D E G F



Customer Concessions Survey

Eat Smart in Parks

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey about your experiences with the concessions at your local park. Your opinion is very important to us, and this information will be used to improve the selection and quality of foods offered by park concessions. This survey should only take about 5 minutes of your time. Thank you!

1. Where are you taking this survey today?

- A. Park location name 1
- B. Park location name 2
- C. I'm not in the park office/ recreation center or park. I was invited to this survey via email.

**If answering from email/web source:

[1A] Which park location do you visit most frequently:

- A. Park location name 1
- B. Park location name 2

Please answer the following questions for the park you most visit.

2. How often do you visit this park?

- A. Daily (1)
- B. Weekly (2)
- C. Monthly (3)
- D. Annually (4)
- E. Rarely /Never (5)
- F. First visit (6)
- G. Other (please specify) (7) _____

3. What brings you to the park? Please select ONE of the following boxes that most represents why you typically visit this park.

- A. To play in a sport
- B. To let my child(ren) play in a sport
- C. To let my daycare/youth program children play in a sport
- D. Other (please specify): _____

4. Do you or any other member of your household participate in the other recreation activities and programs offered by the Parks and Recs department?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not sure

PLEASE CONTINUE TO NEXT PAGE

5) Overall, please rate the quality of your experience(s) at the park?

- A. Excellent
- B. Very good
- C. Satisfactory
- D. Unsatisfactory
- E. No opinion
- F. Comments/Other:

6) What would help you or any members of your household use the park more?

(Please check all that apply)

- More parking
- Affordable sport program fees
- Expanded hours
- Expanded hours concession stand was open
- Welcoming/more people like me/my family here
- Other (please specify):

7. On a scale of 1 to 4 – with 1 being Never and 4 being Frequently – rate how often you do the following:

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
7A. Buy DRINKS or BEVERAGES from this park	1	2	3	4
7B. Buy FOOD from this park	1	2	3	4

7C. On average, how much would you say you spend on food and/or drink at this park per visit?

Using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree, please rate your agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree/ Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A
8. Overall, I am satisfied with the snacks offered at this park.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
9. Concession services at this park offer a variety of healthy food options.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
10. The DRINK OR BEVERAGE purchases I've made at this park facility have been a good value.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
11. The food purchases I've made at this park facility have been a good value.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
12. I would buy more food at this park if they offered healthier options.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
13. I wish more healthier foods were offered at this park.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

	Not at all important	Not very important	Neither important or unimportant	Somewhat important	Very important
14. How important do you think it is for parks to offer healthier DRINK and BEVERAGE choices?	1	2	3	4	5
15. How important do you think it is for parks to offer healthier food choices?	1	2	3	4	5

16. What would motivate you to choose healthier choices when buying food/beverages at this park? Check all that apply.

- Convenience
- Affordable price
- Nutrition information
- Coupons for healthy menu items
- Tastes good
- Looks good
- Concern about your health or that of your family
- Other (please specify): _____

16. This park is considering offering healthier food options at its concession stand. Of these healthy food items, which would you be **MOST LIKELY** to purchase if they were offered at the park (**CHECK ALL THAT APPLY**):

Drinks

- Bottled water
- Milk - low fat, flavored
- Milk - low fat, unflavored
- 100% fruit juice
- 100% vegetable juice
- Iced tea, plain
- Iced tea, sweetened

- Whole grain crackers
- Pretzels
- String Cheese/cheese cubes
- Raisins or other dried fruit
- Trail mix
- Protein bars
- Granola bars
- Baked chips
- Muffins
- Popcorn
- Animal/graham crackers
- Frozen grapes
- Hummus
- Applesauce
- Yogurt (e.g. GoGurt)

Entrees

- Veggie burger
- Turkey dog
- Healthy deli sub sandwich
- Pizza - cheese or veggie
- Grilled chicken sandwich
- Pulled chicken sandwich
- Soft pretzels
- Bread sticks with pizza sauce
- Peanut butter sandwich

Dessert

- Frozen fruit bar or cup
- Frozen yogurt or ice cream
- Low-fat pudding cups
- Fruit Smoothie
- Healthy cookie
- Healthy brownie

Snacks

- Apples with dip
- Fresh fruit
- Fruit cups
- Fresh veggies and dip

18. If you could add anything to this park’s concession stand operations, what would it be? [OPEN]

19. Are you a parent, or caregiver to young children (children under 18)?

YES NO

****IF ANSWER YES TO Q19:**

19A. What is your relationship to the child/children? (Please select the box that most applies to you.)

- Parent
- Grandparent
- Guardian
- Older sibling
- Babysitter/Nanny
- Daycare or childcare provider
- Other (please specify): _____

19B. Please tell us how many children you have, or care for, who fall in the age categories below:

Ages	Number of children you have in these categories:
<4	
4-5 years	
6-7 years	
8-9 years	
10-11 years	
12-13 years	
14-15 years	
16-17 years	
18 years	

////DEMOGRAPHICS////

20. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

21. How old are you? _____

22. What zip code do you live in? _____

23. Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic group?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Multiracial
- Black or African American , non-Hispanic
- Latino or Hispanic
- White , non-Hispanic
- Other
- Prefer not to say

24. Please select your education level:

- Less than high school
- High school or GED only
- Some University
- Associate's degree
- 4-Year degree
- Graduate or professional degree

25. Please select your household income:

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to \$24,999
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

26. On average how many people come with you to watch you and/or your children in your/their sport?

27. Do you have any other comments or suggestions for us or this park?

ID#	Q6. Would you buy this item? Y/N			Q7. How much would you pay for this item?		
	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						

Q8: Demographics

ID#	M	F	Age	Q9. Any other comments for us?
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				
19				
20				

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