

The dollar store diet: Study shows discount produce matches quality of traditional chains

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When you hear about dollar discount stores, the first thought that comes to mind likely isn't groceries for you and your family.

But it might be time to consider dollar-discount stores as a stop for your grocery needs, says a new UNLV study, which found that the quality of fruits and vegetables at dollar stores is just as good as regular grocery store produce.

The findings are especially good news for the 17.3 million people nationwide who live in low-income areas more than one mile from [grocery stores](#)—areas referred to as [food deserts](#) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dollar discount stores may exist in these areas and be an alternative for residents who currently access [fast food](#) or sugary and savory nutrient-deficient snacks found at gas stations which can lead to obesity or other [health problems](#).

But lead author and UNLV School of Community Health Sciences professor [Courtney Coughenour](#) says the data, published this winter in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, benefits budget-conscious shoppers, too.

The research team championed channel blurring, the rising phenomenon of retailers diversifying their inventory to feature products commonly found elsewhere—think drug stores selling toys, grocery stores hawking patio furniture, or dollar stores incorporating a food section—with helping families across socioeconomic lines fill the nutrition gap.

"These findings are important for [public health](#), as our study indicates that channel blurring at the dollar discount stores results in access to healthy, quality produce and affordable food options," the researchers wrote. "Because cost, quality, and accessibility are established barriers to healthy eating, dollar discount stores can serve as community assets that increase access to quality, affordable food."

Among the highlights:

- UNLV's study compared the color, cleanliness, freshness, and firmness of fruits and vegetables in 14 dollar-discount stores to 40 traditional food outlets across the Las Vegas metro area.
- While there was slightly less variety of produce at dollar stores (for example, none of the dollar stores carried pears), there was no significant difference in quality. "The dollar store fruits may be ripe, and you'll have to eat it soon, but it's completely good quality," Coughenour said.
- Eighty-four percent of produce and 89.5 percent of non-produce items were significantly less expensive at dollar stores. The only items that were more expensive at the dollar stores were whole wheat and white bread.

"We are conditioned to believe that cheap, quality produce is too good to be true. If the quality is good, and it's cheap, why not take advantage of the lower price?" said Coughenour.

Coughenour said her team's research continues, but in the meantime, they called on public [health](#) campaigns to help combat consumer misconceptions associating lower prices with inferior [quality](#) and to supply brand loyalists with previous research which shows dollar [store](#) brands are typically equivalent nutritionally.

They also urged outreach programs that cater to low-income populations,

such as food assistance recipients, to recognize dollar discount stores as part of the [food](#) system and consider partnering with them in their efforts to improve public health.

More information: Courtney Coughenour et al, Healthy Food Options at Dollar Discount Stores Are Equivalent in Quality and Lower in Price Compared to Grocery Stores: An Examination in Las Vegas, NV, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph15122773](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15122773)

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