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American Cancer Society Warns of Increase in U.S. Food Swamps; No Substantial Progress Reducing Food Deserts for Millions of People

ACS researchers stress the need to address food availability and prevention.

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ATLANTA, June 3, 2026 — Imagine not having access to affordable, healthy food. For many Americans, it's a reality. A new study by researchers at the American Cancer Society (ACS) shows that between 2003 and 2023, nearly five million people in the United States lived in food deserts, places with no grocery stores. Most of these deserts are in poor and rural areas and in places where people rely on public transit. At the same time, the number of food swamps or areas with mostly restaurants/fast-food locations increased nationwide. The findings are to be published today in the American Journal of Public Health (AJPH).

"Everyone in the United States should be living in a food oasis rather than a food desert," said Dr. Daniel Wiese, principal scientist, cancer disparity research at the American Cancer Society and lead author of the study. "Unfortunately, our findings show many neighborhoods where healthy food options, especially fresh fruits and vegetables, are almost nonexistent, and fast-food restaurants and corner stores with only a few healthy options are dominating the landscape in these same neighborhoods. This needs to change."

For the study, researchers used longitudinal data on all licensed food retailers, geocoded to census-tract level. Changes in the foodscape were examined by estimating the percentages of tracts defined as food deserts and food swamps.

The results showed a considerable increase in the percentage of food swamps and no substantial progress in reducing food deserts. Using a distance-based foodscape measure (a half-mile from tract borders), the percentage of tracts categorized as food swamps increased from 80.2% to 88.5% between 2003 and 2023. The number of food deserts declined slightly over the same period, from 6.1% to 5.5%. However, across all years, the percentage of food deserts was substantially higher in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (persistent poverty) and among those who used public transit. The report also found that access to grocery stores varies by

the mode of transportation. If only relying on public transit, over 7.4 million people would be living in food deserts.

“Now is the time to take decisive steps to prevent unnecessary hardship due to healthy food unavailability,” added Wiese. “Expanding public-private partnerships to establish healthy food retailers in food deserts is one way to help improve the foodscape quality.”

Other ACS researchers contributing to this study include Dr. Marissa Shams-White, Dr. Zhiyuan (Jason) Zheng, and senior author Dr. Farhad Islami.

Additional ACS Resources:

- Living in Food Deserts Is Associated with Shorter Life Expectancy in the U.S.
- Annual Cancer Statistics Report 2026
- Benefits of Good Nutrition During Cancer Treatment
- American Cancer Society Guideline for Diet and Physical Activity for Cancer Survivors

About the American Cancer Society
The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. For more than 110 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our 24/7 helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on Facebook, X, and Instagram.

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