

# Finding fresh food in poor neighborhoods is challenging

By The Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.24.14

Word Count **676**



Customer Alvaro Maduro (left) speaks with Maria Vanegas with The Food Trust about whole grain tortillas at the Indiana Food Market in Philadelphia. Mom-and-pop convenience stores in poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia have been getting healthier through the “Fresh Corner” initiative, an effort designed to help residents eat better in places considered to be food deserts. Photo: AP Photo/Matt Rourke

PHILADELPHIA — For the poor, food isn't just hard to find, it can also be rotten and full of germs.

A new scientific study looked at the corner stores that feed many poor people in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The study found that some of those stores sold germ-filled foods that were close to going bad. Eating such foods can give people food poisoning.

When asked about the study, many of the store customers agreed.

“Potatoes and baby food are moldy, lettuce is rotten,” said 47-year-old Rodney Jenkins. “I ate bad fruit from a corner store and got sick.”

Jenkins worries about feeding his children such bad food.

“It’s horrible,” he said. “When we get food up here, it’s like we get the end of all food, the last batch of it.”

## **Many Different Foods Were Tested**

For years, people have been trying to get stores in poor parts of Philadelphia to offer healthier food. They want them to offer less junk food and more fruits and vegetables.

No one really took a close look at the food such stores sell — until now. It turns out that even their fruits and vegetables can be dangerous.

The new study is being run by food scientist Jennifer Quinlan.

Quinlan and her team visited nearly 400 corner stores and small supermarkets between 2008 and 2010. They were on the lookout for high levels of bacteria, or germs. The scientists tested a range of foods: milk, eggs, lunch meat, sandwiches, fresh fruits and salad greens.

The results of the study were scary.

Much of the milk they looked at had a lot of bacteria, Quinlan said. Fresh vegetables were not easy to find — but what they did find "had a lot of contamination."

Illness caused by bad food is rarely deadly, but it can be very unpleasant. Normally, it leads to diarrhea and vomiting.

## **Bad Food Also Means Wasted Money**

Even if spoiled foods don't make a person sick, they are still a problem in another way. They are a waste of money. If a customer buys something spoiled, or almost spoiled, they end up having to throw it out.

For example, many corner-store owners get milk from larger stores. Then, they carry it in their own unrefrigerated cars. Once in the corner store, the milk often remains outside of refrigerators for a long period of time.

Customers then find that the milk they buy goes bad very quickly. Because the smell of spoiled milk keeps anyone from drinking it, no one gets sick. Milk simply gets thrown out and money is wasted.

In corner stores, Quinlan found a lot of bacteria in such things as bagged salad, strawberries and cucumbers. Levels as high as she found show that the food was close to spoiling. Such food would go bad soon after being bought. Some or all of it would have to be thrown away, thus wasting money.

It wasn't uncommon to see mice in stores, Quinlan said. As a result, many corner stores keep cats, who carry their own germs.

## **There Is Sometimes No Choice**

Quinlan also found evidence of fecal coliforms in foods. Fecal coliform is a type of bacteria. It is found when traces of human or animal feces, or poop, end up in food.

People can eat fecal coliform without harming themselves. However, its presence may mean other disease-causing bacteria are in the food.

When Quinlan and her team tested salad greens in different stores, the results were shocking. They found fecal coliforms every time.

Quinlan agrees that poor people need to eat more fruits and vegetables. However, she said, if the food isn't stored safely, eating it is not a good thing. "You're not doing them any favors getting them that food," she said.

She added that there is "good frozen, canned and dried food" that would be safer.

Sometimes people just don't have a choice. They are forced to eat whatever they can get, safe or not.

"Just getting food" comes first, said food-safety expert Benjamin Chapman.

"The biggest risk is not eating at all," he added.

## Quiz

1 Select the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-6] that has two main ideas from the article.

2 All of the following support the main idea in the article EXCEPT:

- (A) Much of the milk they looked at had a lot of bacteria, Quinlan said.
- (B) No one really took a close look at the food such stores sell — until now.
- (C) If a customer buys something spoiled, or almost spoiled, they end up having to throw it out.
- (D) However, its presence may mean other disease-causing bacteria are in the food.

3 Read the sentence from the article.

*“When we get food up here, it’s like we get the end of all food, the last batch of it.”*

Which phrase BEST replaces “up here” in the sentence above?

- (A) in this store
- (B) in this state
- (C) on these shelves
- (D) in this neighborhood

4 Read the sentence from the article.

*Eating such foods can give people food poisoning.*

Select the sentence from the article that describes “food poisoning.”

- (A) “Potatoes and baby food are moldy, lettuce is rotten.”
- (B) “I ate bad fruit from a corner store and got sick.”
- (C) “When we get food up here, it’s like we get the end of all food, the last batch of it.”
- (D) “The biggest risk is not eating at all.”