

Title: Safe Summer Food (Part 1 Of 3)
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Thursday, June 1 marks the season opening for the Farmer's Market at Geary Community Hospital. Shopping at your local farmer's market is a great way to get locally-grown fresh fruit, vegetables, and other foods for you and your family. In this first article in a series of three, we're going to take a look at how you and your family can take full advantage of this fun and educational shopping experience. By using food safe shopping practices, you can make the Farmer's Market experience a family outing while focusing on healthy food choices.

Safety First! Plan ahead for the types of food you will purchase and the amount of time you will have to get the food stored safely back at home.

First, make sure you take clean recyclable grocery bags. The cloth bags that can be laundered are ideal for the farmer's market shopping experience. Make sure you take multiple bags if you are planning to purchase a wide variety of foods. If you plan to purchase meat products, take a soft-sided insulated bag with a couple of freezer packs in it to keep the meat cold until you can get home with it. If you have errands to run after you shop at the market, a cooler with ice packs is necessary to prevent your purchases from getting overheated in your car.

Grab a small bottle of hand-sanitizer so that you can clean your hands often while at the market. It is not uncommon to find fruit that has a bit of sticky surface from juice, or root plants that still have a bit of soil on them. You might feel more comfortable handling the products from one vendor to another if you have a way to clean your hands in between.

Family Friendly! Adults are not the only ones who can have fun at the Farmer's Market! There are also many opportunities for kids to have fun and learn about the many types of fruits and vegetables grown in their area.

If you want to help your children engage in the farmer's market environment, check out these suggestions offered by Sarah Bentley Garfinkel, of Healthy Schools New York, Health Initiative Inc:

Make It a Game: Play a game of "I Spy" with younger children. Challenges like "I spy with my little eye... a fruit that is round, a vegetable that is orange, or a food that begins with the letter 'B'" build excitement and encourage close attention. For older children, come prepared with a more involved scavenger hunt like the one found here (PDF). Besides produce identification questions, include prompts which encourage conversation with farmers about where and how the food is grown.

Allow Kids to Shop: Give kids money to make their own purchases. Children are more likely to eat what they choose, and counting out dollars and cents provides a real-life math problem. It may be wise to limit what can be bought, as a wide variety of products may be available at the market.

Offer a Challenge: Ask children to find an unfamiliar vegetable or fruit they would like to try. If they are not sure what to choose, ask a farmer for a suggestion. Bring it home to prepare or try on the spot for an impromptu taste test. Everyone may discover a new favorite!

Plan a Post-Market Snack or Meal: Purchase produce with the goal of creating a delicious dish to share. This can be simple, like raw veggies with dip, or something more involved, such as a vegetable soup or a frittata. The more involvement kids have with food, from purchasing to preparing, the more likely they are to eat it.

Find or Create a Kid-Friendly Event: Many markets offer special children's days or even clubs, such as the Power of Produce Club. Others hold occasional events, which can be found through local or market media, or talking with vendors and staff. If these types of activities aren't available, increase the fun on your own by packing a blanket and enjoying a picnic featuring market finds. Our local Farmer's Market at GCH offers a "kids" event each summer, so keep your eyes out for that announcement later in the season.

Healthy Choices! Knowing where your food comes from is a great inspiration for making healthy food choices. When you visit the farmer's market, you are supporting local growers, buying freshly-picked fruits and vegetables or other food products, which can encourage you to try new products in your meal planning.

There are some planning steps you can take to help you get the most out of your farmer's market purchases:

Take your time in previewing the products available at each vendor's booth. If you plan to include the product in your next meal, you will need to purchase a fully-ripe fruit or vegetable. However, if you want to include it in a meal later in the week, you need to select one that is slightly under ripe.

Plan your meals before you go so that you can purchase the products you need for your menus. This is a great time to introduce a new food to your family or invent a modified recipe to a family favorite.

Choose a wide variety of colors and textures to expand the nutritional value of your combined selections. Eating a "rainbow" of fruits and vegetables is a great way to ensure you are getting the essential vitamins and minerals your body needs.

A farmer's market offers a fun and friendly shopping experience where you and your family can enjoy safe locally produced food. For more information about summer food safety, join me next week as we look food safety for outdoor parties. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!