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Martin's offers healthy snacks at checkout aisles

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Martin's Food Markets is putting healthy snacks near two checkout lanes each in eight of its Richmond-area stores.

Martin's Food Markets is putting healthy snacks near two checkout lanes each in eight of its Richmond-area stores in an initiative to make it easier for customers to choose a banana or bag of low-fat chips over a candy bar or box of Nerds.

Many grocery stores have had candy-free checkout lanes for years to avoid situations where parents have to say "no" to a screaming toddler demanding a sugary snack. This new initiative takes it a step further by offering healthy options instead of just removing candy bars, which remain just an aisle or two away in most cases.

"Doesn't it just make good sense that we make the healthy choices the easy choice?" said Dr. Donald Stern, Richmond City Health District director. "In Virginia, 40 percent of fourth-grade students suffer from obesity or overweight. And 59 percent of the city residents in Richmond are either overweight or obese," Stern said. "Obesity contributes to many ill health care problems, such as heart disease, cancer, arthritis, stroke, diabetes and other ill health conditions. ... It makes sense that community-based organizations, businesses and government entities come together to try to develop strategies to make healthy choices easy choices."

Along with the Richmond City Health District, the Greater Richmond Fit4Kids, a youth health and fitness nonprofit, and Martin's are partners in the initiative. Valerie Waters, a registered dietitian and in-store nutritionist for Martin's, said the items at the healthy ideas displays meet specific nutritional standards. "Most of the products — we did fit a few others in there — are 220 calories or less. They have to be no more than 30 percent fat, no more than 10 percent saturated fat, no more than 35 percent of calories from sugar, and they have to have no more than 250 milligrams of sodium," Waters said.

Healthy ideas items at checkout lanes at the Martin's store on Forest Hill Avenue in South Richmond included fresh fruit — apples and bananas — and packaged snack items.

The items at that store included SunRype Squiggles, a 60-calorie fruit snack in strawberry and apple flavors and selling three for \$2; a 220-calorie Odwalla Chewy Nut Bar, regular price \$1.49 but on sale 10 for \$10; and Crispy Green freeze-dried pineapple snacks, at \$1.49 per bag.

Many food policy experts say it will take broader, fundamental changes in food production and marketing, rather than efforts to try to change individual behavior, to reverse the obesity crisis. Tom Byrd, board chairman of Fit4Kids, said all small efforts add up. "Every journey starts with a small step. So I think today we take this small step," Byrd said. "We begin to create an awareness of the need to make healthy choices in the moment, and they begin to build upon each other."

A Virginia Department of Health grant of \$14,500 to the Richmond City Health District helped launch the initiative. A grant from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth to Fit4Kids will allow the project to expand to other Martin's stores and to other grocery chains over the next year, as well as fund a number of other projects, officials said. That grant is \$77,350 for two years.