



NEWS RELEASE

Defense Commissary Agency

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Commissary customers find healthy fresh fruits, vegetables thanks to resilient supply chain

*By Kevin L. Robinson,
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Note: To read this release online, go to the DeCA [website](#).

FORT LEE, Va.

– Commissary produce personnel and industry partners are working through challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the military stores are well-stocked with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.



At Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, Commissary, store associate Nora Gabuat sanitizes a produce display case to ensure preventive measures are followed. (DeCA photo: Robert Lunetta)

For service members and their families, this means continued access to the nutritious fruits and vegetables needed for their daily meals, said Deborah Harris, registered dietitian and health and wellness program manager for the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA).

“One thing that many may not know about our commissary produce is that we work really hard with our produce distributors to procure local fresh fruits and vegetables whenever possible,” Harris said. “We support local investments to strengthen local communities while

reducing our carbon footprint with less food miles.”

Now that summer is here, commissary customers can find nutrient-dense fresh produce by shopping for varieties – fresh, canned or frozen – that have no added sugar, sodium, and are low in fat.

“Fresh produce, because it hasn’t undergone any processing, is a sure bet, as nothing has been added,” Harris said. “A great way to get kids to increase their fruit and vegetable intake is to let them choose an item in our produce section on their own and then help you prepare the item for a snack or meal. We have a great selection of [dietitian-approved recipes](#) on our website, www.commissaries.com.”

The nutritional value of produce is reinforced by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a reference produced by the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These guidelines recommend fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy eating pattern. According to the MyPlate food guidance system, Americans should make half their plate fruits and vegetables for most meals, Harris said.

“A diet high in fruits and vegetables provides key vitamins and minerals to ward off chronic disease and keep your immune system strong,” she added. “Also, because they tend to be lower in calories than other food groups, a diet rich in fruit and vegetables is a waistline-friendly strategy.”

Working through COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on commissaries is visible to customers, such as plexiglass shields, disinfecting carts, handwashing stations, social distancing tape on floors, and staff wearing masks. The adjustments for produce departments were less visible. Unprecedented shopping trends pressed store teams, prompting managers to forecast orders well in advance to obtain sufficient quantities of high-demand items, said Mike Pfister, chief of the perishable division for DeCA’s Store Operations Group.

“Produce is highly perishable and not mass produced in a factory; it is grown, harvested, processed, and then shipped to locations for display,” Pfister said. “A lot of time goes into maintaining a produce department as well as the logistical planning to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for our customers, along with dealing with so many other variables such as weather, insects, contaminants/diseases and workforce availability.”

Teamwork and communication between the commissaries and their headquarters support is crucial, Pfister said, to address concerns with produce suppliers, trucking companies, contracting issues, installation access restrictions and adjustments to delivery times.

“Our store produce departments have done a fantastic job in this unprecedented time, providing great customer service,” he said. “Our teams are continuously putting the mission of supporting military communities first.”

Partnering with industry

In the best of times, commissaries work closely with their industry partners to supply the products customers want. COVID-19 put that relationship to a test no one had anticipated, said Bridget Bennett, produce category manager for the agency’s sales directorate.

“Daily communications with all of our produce suppliers became critical,” Bennett said. “With the initial panic buying, the suppliers were caught off guard as we all were. Order quantities increased 50 percent on many items, and they couldn’t get enough product into the warehouse as quickly as it was being depleted.

“Items we would normally sell gave way to larger packs of hardier items such as citrus, apples, potatoes and carrots,” she said. “In some instances the stores would have to receive whatever they could to supply the customers with product. When personnel in the packing houses grew thin and the current supply was depleted, the stores had extra bulk on hand until the packers could catch up.”

Because of the virus, growers and packers faced a shrinking market, Bennett said. Food service suppliers catering to restaurants, theme parks, cruise lines and schools suddenly found themselves without buyers. The fields that supported those sectors couldn’t be harvested and were subsequently plowed under. Some farms went bankrupt, and processing plants reduced their products down to a core list of items, discontinuing some ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables and packaged salads.

However, going into the summer, most produce availability is returning to normal, Bennett said. One notable exception would be corn, which at the moment, is in very limited supply. “Produce is in peak season for summer fruits and vegetables, and commissary shoppers are hungry for fresh cherries, watermelon, cantaloupes, peaches, squash, tomatoes, corn and all the other goodies – too many to mention.”

From the farm to the commissary shelf: It’s a supply line that cannot be taken for granted, Harris said.

“I have personally been in the fields of our American farmers and have seen the product that is being grown for our military families,” she said. “One thing that is never lost on me is the pride the farmers feel in knowing that they are supporting our nation’s greatest assets, members of our military community.”

-DeCA-

About DeCA: *The Defense Commissary Agency operates a worldwide chain of commissaries providing groceries to military personnel, retirees and their families in a safe and secure shopping environment. Commissaries provide a military benefit, saving authorized patrons thousands of dollars annually on their purchases compared to similar products at commercial retailers. The discounted prices include a 5-percent surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones. A core military family support element, and a valued part of military pay and benefits, commissaries contribute to family readiness, enhance the quality of life for America's military and their families, and help recruit and retain the best and brightest men and women to serve their country.*

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