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# More retailers say yes to food stamps

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By Paul Sakuma, AP file

More retailers are accepting food stamps, which can be used to buy breads, cereals, fruits, vegetables, dairy products and fish, meat and poultry.

By **Jayne O'Donnell** and Rachel Huggins, USA TODAY

More retailers are accepting food stamps, as a record number of consumers are turning to government aid to pay for groceries.

Nearly 39 million people received food stamps — now known as Electronic Benefit Transfers — in April 2009, up about 20% over April 2008. Retailers ranging from some Costco (COST) stores — yes, quarts of capers do qualify — to 7-Eleven to Target (TGT) are moving quickly to cater to cash-strapped customers.

To accept the debit-card-like EBT cards, stores must meet at least one of the following conditions:

- They regularly sell at least three varieties of foods in each of four categories — breads/cereals; dairy products; fruits and vegetables; and meat, fish or poultry — and at least two of the categories must include perishable foods.
- Or more than half of total gross sales must be in "staple foods," which means no candy, soft drinks or prepared foods.

In its third-quarter earnings report July 8, Family Dollar cited EBT as among the reasons for its success in this economy. Same-store sales were up 6.2% for the quarter, and food and beverages gained the most. Food stamps represent "a significant opportunity for us," said CEO Howard Levine. EBT spending at Family Dollar (FDO) was up 18% from March 2008 to March 2009, says spokesman Josh Braverman.

Last month, Target extended its acceptance of EBT benefits from its Super Target and other stores with expanded food selections to all 1,700 stores. Costco this month started testing its checkout technology at six New York City locations to prepare for EBT acceptance. Joe Portera, executive vice president and COO of Costco's Eastern and Canadian divisions, says Costco members began asking to use EBT cards in the last six months.

## EBT BENEFITS

Food stamp purchases that are permitted and those that are banned:

Eligible food:

- Breads, cereals
- Fruits, vegetables
- Meats, fish, poultry
- Dairy products
- Seeds and plants that produce food for the household to eat

Ineligible items:

- Beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes or tobacco
- Non-food items, such as pet foods, soaps, paper products, household supplies, vitamins and medicines
- Hot foods and foods eaten in the store

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

"This is the right thing to do," says Portera. "We'll ultimately need to expand the program to our other stores, so right now, we're working out any bugs in the system."

Other retailers accepting EBT:

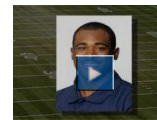
• **BJ's Wholesale Club, (BJS)** which began accepting food stamps in 1999 in Maine and Upstate New York, began taking EBT in all of its stores in April.

• More than half of the 5,700 7-Eleven stores in the U.S. now accept EBT. The chain has seen an increase of about 13% in such purchases in the last nine months, says Scott Robertson, vice president of field merchandising for 7-Eleven. The stores have added private-label products that are up to 20% cheaper than brand names; about

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half of the 200 products can be purchased with EBT cards.

•About 5,000 of the 7,000 CVS (CVS) stores accept EBT, and the chain is adding more stores "to meet the needs of customers ... in these challenging economic times," says spokeswoman Erin Pensa.



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