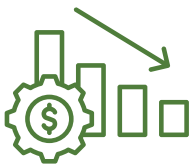


Making a Case: Food is Medicine in Primary Care Settings

Food is Medicine (FIM) programs integrate access to healthy, nutritious food into health care, providing clinical care to patients at risk of or living with chronic diseases. These initiatives range from medically tailored meals and produce prescriptions to nutrition education and food pantry partnerships. Poor nutrition contributes to the development of chronic illnesses, including diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.¹ Many studies have highlighted the vital connection between nutrition, food security, and overall health, particularly in managing and preventing chronic diseases. The [Food is Medicine Research Action Plan](#) from the Aspen Institute celebrates and compiles all analyses to date as this field continues to expand rapidly!⁸

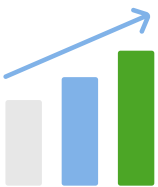
For health centers, the mission and effectiveness of Food is Medicine can also be aligned with margins.

Reduced “cost of care” for high-risk patients



Diet-related illnesses account for \$1.1 trillion in U.S. medical costs and lost worker productivity every year.² As chronic diseases and food insecurity rates rise, Food is Medicine interventions, such as produce prescriptions, medically tailored groceries, and meals, are projected to be both cost-effective and cost-saving, a rare dual outcome in health care interventions.⁴ They can help reduce the cost of care for high-risk patients who become a financial strain to the health center.

Improved quality metrics



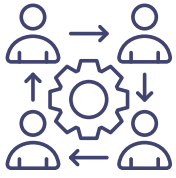
Food is Medicine interventions improve measurable health markers, reduce emergency department and hospital visits, and support adherence to care plans. New studies have also shown positive impacts on clinical measures, including those related to diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.¹²

Improved patient engagement and satisfaction



Many patients prefer nutritional strategies to treat and manage chronic diseases rather than medications. More than 4 in 5 Americans believe health care should offer more nutrition programs to treat and manage illnesses, and nearly 9 in 10 patients would prefer to rely more on healthy eating than on medications to manage their disease.⁵ This public perception of food as a strategy to improve health outcomes, patient engagement, and satisfaction is gaining popularity and represents an opportunity to introduce these programs. Higher satisfaction rates increase the health center’s bottom line.

Staff enthusiasm and workflow improvements



Health center professionals increasingly recognize Food is Medicine programs as cost-effective tools for improving health outcomes. Several studies have revealed limited awareness among health care workers of FIM programs, but once they are defined and explained, 4 out of 5 health care workers immediately recognize their value, with 85% eager to recommend them.⁵ Additionally, requirements for nutrition education in medical training will be an increasing priority for education and training institutions nationally, making it a priority for practices to include in workflows.⁶ Food is Medicine programs can increase staff enthusiasm and reduce clinical burnout with improved workflows. It is also a great program to integrate a multidisciplinary team and self-management programming, which increases billable services.

Payer support



Health care payers, both public and private, are increasingly supporting and covering Food is Medicine programs through reimbursement and value-based models, incorporating FIM into cost-containment and quality-improvement strategies. There is an increased recognition of the crucial role of nutrition in improving health outcomes and reducing costs. Health centers can use various funding sources to implement FIM programs, such as Medicaid 1115 waivers, Medicaid managed care plans (value-based contracting incentives), [USDA Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Grants](#) (GusNIP), [SNAP-Ed collaborations](#), philanthropy and hospital community benefit, or local food banks, farms, and cooperative extension services. There is a strong movement at the Federal and State levels to create a billable service for FIM programs, and the sooner you get started, the better equipped you will be.

Beyond Health, The Ripple Effect for Local Economies



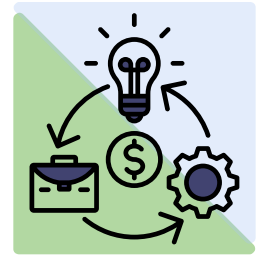
Food is Medicine programs can transform entire communities and strengthen local economies, fostering collaborations across a wide range of organizations. Prioritizing local purchasing for program food supply can generate \$0.32 to \$0.90 in additional economic activity per dollar invested, strengthening local food supply networks and supporting stable markets.⁷ This is not just about reducing health care costs; it is about:

- Revitalizing local economies: Supporting local farms, food businesses, and agricultural communities in which the health center is part of.
- Creating jobs: Sustaining livelihoods for farmers, food workers, and many others who are part of the health center community.

Establishing strong, trusting partnerships can strengthen local supply chains, encourage sustainable food production practices, create employment opportunities, and boost local economies. This benefits the health center at several levels.

Innovative Models

There is no one-size-fits-all intervention for Food is Medicine programs, and that is a great advantage. You can use what you have and create something that works for your community. Innovation and creativity are key in this field, and the [Recipe4Health](#) (R4H) model from Alameda County, California, is a good example. The R4H model addresses food insecurity and chronic conditions through an innovative Food is Medicine approach that integrates a "Food Pharmacy" and a "Behavioral Pharmacy." The Food Pharmacy provides a bag of regenerative, organic, local produce delivered to participants' homes for 12 weeks, while the Behavioral Pharmacy offers group medical visits. The program integrates health centers into their "safety net" to be able to serve the medical needs of the patients. A quasi-experimental study of Recipe4health's interventions showed significant increases in fruit and vegetable consumption, improvements in food security, enhanced physical activity, and reductions in depressive symptoms.⁹



Another good example is the San Diego Farmer's Food as Medicine Services, a partnership between UC San Diego Center for Community Health under ACTRI, San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, San Diego farmers, grocery stores, and community-based organizations across San Diego County. San Diego farmers provided 33,000 farm-fresh produce boxes to more than 2,250 households across the county as part of the [¡Más Fresco! Plus program](#). They estimate the program's cost per beneficiary for locally sourced produce at \$36 per home-delivered produce box, totaling \$864 over 6 months if one box is delivered per week (cost estimates will vary by provider). This cost is less than 1/5 of a 1-day hospital stay.¹⁰ How much does it cost to treat chronic disease patients? As a health center, you can collaborate with programs such as the ¡Más Fresco! Plus program or start your own!

Take action!

Health centers can be part of Food is Medicine programs or play a fundamental role, while also benefiting from both short-term and long-term returns.

Short-term gains: first 3 months

- Improved patient engagement and satisfaction
- Increased screening rates: screen for food insecurity and go further by integrating nutrition assessments and education into routine care can create added billable services.
- Higher visit compliance and lower no-show rates lead to increased billing.
- Staff enthusiasm and workflow improvements reduce clinical burden and decrease staff turnover.



Measurable Clinical ROI: within the first year

- Lower A1c, blood pressure, weight
- Increased referral completion
- Improved quality measure performance
- Reduced medication burden

Financial ROI Realization: after the year

- Lower cost of care for high-risk patients
- Increased value-based incentive payments
- Stronger shared savings performance
- Higher retention, resulting in more stable revenue

Next Steps

Establishing a Food is Medicine program presents a powerful, evidence-based strategy to enhance individual and community health, address non-medical health needs, and foster a more sustainable health care system by leveraging the benefits of nutrition.¹¹ Health centers can begin by using the [NCFH Food is Medicine Replication Guide for Health Centers](#) to assess their readiness level and identify resources and potential partnering organizations to help health centers implement their own Food is Medicine program.

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