

Food as medicine: UTHealth and partners fill prescriptions for food insecurity

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The answer to food insecurity could be as simple as a prescription for healthy food from your health care provider and the means to obtain it, particularly in food deserts, said researchers led by The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health.

The results will appear in the October issue of *Translational Behavioral Medicine*. Study partners included the Houston Food Bank, Harris County Public Health, and The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

The two-year study focused on north Pasadena, Texas, where [food insecurity](#) is one of the highest in Harris County, said senior author Shreela V. Sharma, Ph.D., RD, professor of epidemiology, human genetics, and environmental sciences at UTHealth School of Public Health. First author was Jennifer N. Aiyer, MPH, RD, a doctoral student in epidemiology at the school.

People who are food insecure are also the ones struggling with chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and [high blood pressure](#), Sharma said.

"We want to catch them before they become sick," she said. "Those who are food insecure often eat unhealthy food."

The study was funded by the national BUILD Health Challenge through the Harris County BUILD Partnership, which aims to establish sustainable public sources of accessible [healthy food](#) in north Pasadena, develop a larger network of innovative food suppliers and distributors, and promote a healthy diet through the food prescription program. Study participants were recruited from two school-based clinics and one federally qualified [health center](#).

"Many health care systems are now screening their patients for food security," Sharma said. "But there are challenges. What do you do when you find out

they are food insecure?"

To answer that question, participants who were identified as food insecure at their clinics received a "food prescription" card from their providers that they could take to a designated food pantry located in north Pasadena every two weeks. They could receive as much as 30 pounds of fruits and vegetables and four forms of nonperishable foods such as lean protein, beans, and whole grains. The pantry resembled a small grocery store to reduce the stigma associated with going to a food pantry, and was stocked with food obtained from the Houston Food Bank.

Participants also received nutrition information, including books in English and Spanish, which discussed general nutrition, food storage and safety, and healthy recipes.

Of the 242 patients who opted to take part in the program, 172 (71.1%) redeemed the food prescription at the pantry at least once and of those who redeemed their prescriptions, 99% reported eating all or most of the fruits and vegetables. More than 94% felt that the produce helped them eat healthier.

"The biggest triumph is that the pantry continues to operate today," said Sharma. "Food insecurity stems from lack of access. The shift is providing access to healthy food and teaching people how to use it. That was the secret sauce to making this happen."

Such investments should last long-term with continuous access to healthy [food](#) and nutritional education, she said.

Provided by University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston

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