Saratoga Library English Conversation Club
FIM and Produce Prescriptions
October 22, 2026

Last week we explored physical health and nutrition, in particular a growing movement called "Food is Medicine". The goal of this movement is to treat access to healthy food as a critical part of healthcare. By making nutritious food affordable, the programs are designed to improve long-term patient health, reduce the severe impacts of chronic diseases, and ultimately lower overall healthcare costs.

"Produce prescriptions" are a part of these programs. The prescriptions are **vouchers**, coupons, or boxes of fresh food provided by health care workers. They are given to people with chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes, **hypertension**, and **obesity**. The prescriptions are for nutritious, high-fiber foods that help patients manage these illnesses more effectively.

Today we will read about some common produce prescription foods and their benefits. First, review the vocabulary and match them to their meanings.

Vocabulary Preview

1) **A1C levels** (A-1-C LEH-vuhlz)	A. an organ in the body that filters waste, extra fluid, and toxins out of the blood to create urine
2) **antioxidants** (an-tee-OK-sih-duhnts)	B. a vital mineral found in foods like bananas and potatoes that helps muscles contract and keeps the heart beating at a healthy rhythm
3) **cardiologist** (kar-dee-AH-luh-jist)	C. the medical term for high blood pressure, which forces the heart to work harder than normal to pump blood
4) **glucose** (GLOO-kohss)	D. a natural mineral found in foods like nuts and leafy greens that helps nerves, muscles, and bones stay healthy
5) **hypertension** (hy-per-TEN-shuhn)	E. natural substances found in foods like fruits and vegetables that help protect the body's cells from damage
6) **inflammation** (in-fluh-MAY-shuhn)	F. a medical condition of having a large amount of excess body fat that can affect a person's overall health
7) **kidney** (KID-nee)	G. a type of sugar that comes from food and travels through the blood to give the body's cells energy
8) **magnesium** (mag-NEE-zee-uhm)	H. the body's natural response to injury or irritation, which causes swelling, redness, and heat to help heal the area
9) **obesity** (oh-BEE-sih-tee)	I. a ticket or coupon that can be used just like cash to pay for specific goods or services, like fresh fruits and vegetables
10) **potassium** (puh-TASS-ee-uhm)	J. a measure of the average amount of glucose (sugar) in your blood over the past two or three months. It is given as a percentage.
11) **sodium** (SOH-dee-uhm)	K. a specialized doctor who diagnoses, treats, and helps prevent diseases of the heart and blood vessels
12) **voucher** (VOW-cher)	L. a mineral found in table salt and food that helps balance fluids in the body, but can raise blood pressure if a person eats too much of it

Answers: 1-J; 2-E, 3-K; 4-G; 5- C; 6- H; 7-A; 8 - D; 9 –F; 10 –B; 11 -L; 12 – I

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Prescriptions For Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Help Boost Health
September 4, 2023, Heard on Morning Edition

The idea of food as medicine dates back to the ancient Greek doctor Hippocrates (hih-POK-krah-tees). A new study adds to the evidence that a diet full of fruits and vegetables can help improve heart health. This research comes amid an epidemic of diet-related diseases, which compete with smoking as a leading cause of death in the United States.

Researchers evaluated the impact of "produce prescriptions," which provide free fruits and vegetables to people with diet related diseases including diabetes, **obesity** and **hypertension**.

The study included nearly 4,000 people in 12 states who struggle to afford healthy food. They received **vouchers**, averaging $63 a month, for up to 10 months, which could be redeemed for produce at retail stores or farmers markets.

Health care providers tracked changes in weight, blood pressure and blood sugar among the participants. "We were excited to see improvements," says study author Kurt Hager, an instructor at University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School.

Among adults with **hypertension**, the researchers saw decreases in blood pressure which could have a meaningful impact on health outcomes. People with uncontrolled diabetes also saw improvement in their **A1C levels**, which is a two to three month average of their blood sugar

Their **A1C levels** declined significantly by about 0.6% (point 6 percent). These reductions in blood sugar are roughly half of the decreases commonly found with prescribed medications. “This is really encouraging for just a simple change in diet," Hager says.

"I felt great," says Joann Erickson, 60, who participated in a produce prescription program at One Community Health in Sacramento, California. The program is at the forefront of initiatives aimed at making healthy food more affordable and accessible. Approximately 94% of the participants reported that taking part in the program improved their health.

"Being able to buy healthy food, I felt like a millionaire," Ms. Erickson says. She loaded her cart with strawberries, blueberries, cherries and salad greens, items she normally can't afford. "It was a big high for me," she says. After six months on the program her doctor was able to lower her dose of blood pressure medication. Her blood sugar levels dropped, too. "I had more energy," Erickson says.

"Anything that lowers A1C levels and improves blood pressure control is beneficial," says Dr. Dariush Mozaffarian (dair-ee-ush moh-zaf-FAIR-ee-un), a **cardiologist** and professor at Tufts University, where the research was conducted. “The challenge is to maintain these reductions.”

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"Improvements in blood **glucose** can significantly reduce the risk of conditions like eye disease, **kidney** disease, and nerve disease," he says, which happen frequently among people with uncontrolled diabetes.

For now, the produce prescription programs offer only short-term assistance. Since Joann Erickson's produce vouchers ended, her monthly federal government Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) were also cut significantly. Now, once again, she can't afford healthy food. "After I stopped the program, I saw my blood pressure going up," she says.

For the *food is medicine* strategy to work, it's clear that the people will need long-term support. "We need to get to a place where there are continuing benefits," says Mozaffarian.

Discussion Questions

1. If you had a chronic disease, would you prefer to manage it with a medication or with food?
2. Do you think the cost of health insurance would decrease if more people ate healthy foods?
3. Are obesity, hypertension and diabetes medical problems in your home country?
4. Are the traditional foods of your home country healthy or do they promote certain conditions?
5. What health conditions result from eating too much white rice or white bread?
6. Do you think "produce prescription" programs should be expanded and promoted by health care providers?
7. What foods have medical benefits for hypertension, cancer, diabetes, and the flu? Read the following list to find out. Can you add other fruits or vegetables to the list?

1. High Blood Pressure (Hypertension)
The following foods have special nutrients that help lower high blood pressure. They relax your blood vessels, push out extra salt, and take stress off your heart.

- Dark Leafy Greens such as Spinach and Kale are full of calcium, **magnesium**, and **potassium**. These minerals help balance your body's fluids and lower blood pressure.
- Beets are full of natural chemicals that your body turns into a gas called nitric oxide in the blood. This gas opens up and relaxes your blood vessels.
- Berries like blueberries and strawberries contain special **antioxidants** that help to make your blood vessels work better and lower your blood pressure.
- Bananas and avocados are loaded with **potassium**, which tells your **kidneys** to flush out extra **sodium** (salt).

2. Preventing and Fighting Cancer
Some food prescriptions focus on fighting swelling in the body (inflammation) and stopping cell damage.

- Vegetables such as Broccoli, Brussels Sprouts, and Cabbage are packed with plant chemicals that fight swelling, protect healthy cells, and keep tumors from growing.

- Dark Berries such as blueberries and black berries are loaded with Vitamin C and plant nutrients that help to stop harmful cell damage before it starts.
- Garlic contains a strong natural compound that helps slow down unhealthy cell growth and gives your immune system a boost.

3. Type 2 Diabetes and Prediabetes

For diabetes, food prescriptions focus on high-fiber and low-glycemic foods (foods that do not make your blood sugar go up fast).

- Legumes and Beans (Chickpeas, Black Beans, Lentils) are great sources of plant protein and fiber. The fiber slows down how fast your body absorbs sugar after a meal.
- Root Vegetables such as sweet potatoes have a lower glycemic index and lots of fiber that keep your energy and blood sugar steady.
- Oats contain a special kind of fiber called beta-glucan that lowers bad the form of cholesterol and helps your body handle insulin better.

4. The Flu and Viral Illnesses 🤒

While a food prescription is not a permanent cure for a sudden sickness like the flu, eating food with the right vitamins can help you heal faster and support your immune system.

- Citrus Fruits such as oranges, grapefruits, and lemons are high in Vitamin C, which helps your white blood cells fight off viruses.
- Yellow and Red Bell Peppers have even more Vitamin C than oranges, giving your immune system a big shield against sickness.
- Ginger and Turmeric are spices and roots that can calm swelling, ease sore muscles from the flu, and help your stomach feel better.

Discussion Questions

1. What are healthy foods that you like to eat? How do you prepare them?
2. What are unhealthy foods that you like to eat? Why do you like them?
3. Which foods do you think you should eat more of?
4. Do you have to be careful about eating white rice?
5. If you have children, how do you encourage them to eat fruit and vegetables?

If you are interested in learning more about the Food is Medicine movement, you can register for Tufts University's Food is Medicine National Summit which will be held on October 28. You can attend for free online. RSVP: https://tuftsfoodismedicine.org/

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