

Medically Supportive Food and Nutrition: Bridging food and healthcare

To improve health outcomes, reduce avoidable healthcare spending and increase health equity for Medi-Cal beneficiaries, California must add medically supportive food and nutrition interventions as covered benefits in Medi-Cal.

Too many Californians, particularly Californians of color, are living with largely preventable chronic conditions.ⁱ Adequate food and nutrition are a fundamental part of preventing and treating chronic conditions,^{ii,iii,iv} and can significantly improve a patient's quality of life and health status^{v,vi} while also reducing healthcare costs.^{vii,viii,ix}

California has recognized the critical role of nutrition and its influence on health outcomes and health equity through its inclusion of medically supportive food and nutrition interventions in CalAIM. Medically supportive food and nutrition (MSF&N) interventions, which provide nutrient rich whole foods,^x are evidence-informed medical interventions shown to improve health outcomes for individuals living with a range of common medical conditions. However, these services are optional, meaning individual health plans must voluntarily opt into providing them, leaving many people with MediCal who would benefit from MSF&N without access to these critical interventions.

MSF&N interventions have the potential to transform our disease care system to a true health care delivery system. By fully embracing food and nutritional support as a critical and strategic investment in health outcomes and health equity, *California can lead the nation in tackling root causes of health disparities and become the healthiest state in the nation.*

Medically Supportive Food and Nutrition (MSF&N):

Medically Supportive Food and Nutrition (MSF&N) refers to a spectrum of interventions that provide nutrient rich whole food, to prevent, manage or reverse diet-sensitive health conditions to improve patients' health. The spectrum of medically supportive food and nutrition interventions includes: medically tailored meals, medically supportive meals, food pharmacies, medically tailored groceries, medically supportive groceries, produce prescriptions and cooking/behavioral coaching when paired with food provision.

Across California, numerous organizations have piloted these interventions, also commonly known as “food as medicine” programs. Evaluations from those programs, and others nationally, show that they improve health and reduce avoidable healthcare spending.

The Case for Making Medically Supportive Food and Nutrition Interventions Covered Benefits:

Too many Californians suffer from diet-related conditions.

- Among people with Medi-Cal, 15% of individuals are living with diabetes and 34% suffer from high blood pressure.^{xi} Black Californians are nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes than white Californians and more than 10% more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure.^{xii,xiii}

- Preterm delivery leads to more than 35% of infant deaths in the United States.^{xiv} Rates of preterm birth have been rising in CA since 2017 and Black birthing people have over 1.5x more preterm births than their white counterparts.^{xv}

Medically supportive food and nutrition interventions can help prevent, manage and reverse diet-related conditions.

- By increasing vegetable and fruit intake by 1 serving per day the risk of all-cause mortality drops by 5%.^{xvi,xvii}
- Medically supportive food and nutrition interventions can support achieving a normal average blood sugar, which for patients with prediabetes and diabetes, reduces rates of diabetes-related eye disease, nerve disease, and kidney disease.^{xviii}
- For patients with Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, achieving a normal average blood sugar reduces the risk of heart attack and stroke by up to 57% and all-cause mortality by up to 27%.^{xix}
- Medically supportive food and nutrition interventions can reduce blood pressure which, for a patient with cardiovascular disease, can reduce their risk of death by 15% and reduce their risk of stroke and heart failure by 39%.^{xx,xxi}
- Pregnant people who received a medically supportive food intervention saw a 37% reduction in rates of preterm birth.^{xxii}

Medically supportive food and nutrition interventions can reduce health care spending.

- Researchers have estimated subsidizing healthy foods could save \$40 billion to \$100 billion in healthcare costs nationally.^{xxiii}
- Sustaining normal average blood sugar for patients with diabetes over 3 years decreases total cost of care for patients by \$2,207 compared to a \$3,006 increase for patients without control.^{xxiv}
- In 1 year, the average medical cost for a healthy, full-term infant is \$5,085. While in just 6 months, the average medical cost for a preterm infant is \$11,001.^{xxv,xxvi}
- Reducing healthcare utilization also drives down costs.
 - Studies show 44-77% fewer emergency room visits and admissions^{xxvii,xxviii} and a 38% reduction in hospital transportation costs associated with food-based interventions.
 - Over 1.5 million hospitalizations could potentially be averted in 1 year leading to net savings of \$13.6 billion.^{xxix}

To advance health equity, improve health outcomes, and reduce avoidable healthcare spending, California must make medically supportive food and nutrition interventions covered benefits in Medi-Cal.

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