

An apple a day on doctors' orders keeps ill health away

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Fresh fruit and vegetables prescribed by doctors could be an effective way to improve the health of Australians with type 2 diabetes, according to a new study published today in the *Journal of Nutrition*.

Researchers at The George Institute for Global Health and UNSW Sydney found that people with type 2 diabetes and [high blood sugar](#) who took part in a "produce prescription" program over 12 weeks ate nearly two extra servings of fruit and vegetables a day. They also lost 1.7kg in weight and saw a 10% drop in their LDL ([low-density lipoprotein](#) or the "bad cholesterol" that causes [heart disease](#)).

Lead author Jason Wu, Head of Nutrition Science at The George Institute and Professor at UNSW Medicine & Health's School of Population Health, said this was an important first study in Australia demonstrating the potential of "food as medicine" to help doctors and patients better manage diet-related diseases.

"We know that eating a nutritious diet is key to maintaining health. But only one in twenty Australians eat enough fruit and vegetables with many struggling to access healthy foods, especially those from the most disadvantaged communities," he said.

"Right now, unhealthy diets cause more than 20,000 [premature deaths](#) a year in Australia, and untold suffering for patients and their loved ones."

To test produce prescription for health care in Australia, the researchers worked with specialist doctors at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney to recruit 50 individuals with type 2 diabetes who were experiencing [food insecurity](#). Each participant received a healthy food box designed by nutrition professionals, accompanying recipe ideas, and the option to see a dietitian fortnightly.

After 12 weeks, there was a significant improvement in participants' diet, blood cholesterol levels and body weight. The majority (96%) of participants said the program was helpful or extremely helpful for improving theirs and their families' diet, and that they'd be willing to pay to continue on the program.

"Our research shows that not only is prescribing healthy produce very promising for improving the diet and health of individuals with type 2 diabetes, it was also very popular. What we need next is to expand and evaluate this program in larger studies to confirm its [health benefits](#)," Dr. Wu said.

There is growing recognition that health care systems must do more to prevent and treat diet-related diseases, and the current model of relying mostly on drugs to manage such disease is not enough. In the United States, healthy food and meal prescription programs are already being integrated into health care. Paid for by government and health care providers, they are delivering promising health benefits and even reducing overall health care costs.

Mr. Tristan Harris, co-CEO of Harris Farms, who supplied the healthy foods used in the study, said, "We are absolutely thrilled to be working with Professor Wu and The George Institute to prove that good food is medicine and help reduce the unnecessary disease burden of unhealthy diets and the spiraling health costs that come along with it. This is the most common-sense approach to health we could possibly imagine."

More information: Jason H Y Wu et al, Testing the Feasibility and Dietary Impact of a "Produce Prescription" Program for Adults with Undermanaged Type 2 Diabetes and Food Insecurity in Australia, *The Journal of Nutrition* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/jn/nxac152](https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxac152)

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