

Fruit and vegetable prescriptions encourage children to eat healthy

12 June 2018



Caregivers of children receiving prescriptions for fruit and vegetables told researchers they enjoyed visiting the farmers' market with their kids and guiding the children to use the prescriptions for their favorite fruits and vegetables. Credit: Amy Saxe-Custack, Michigan State University

A new study shows that a fruit and vegetable prescription program can improve access to healthy foods for underserved children. The program, which was implemented in Flint, Michigan, could be replicated in other areas to address food insecurity in children.

In August 2015, the Hurley Children's Center—Sumathi Mukkamala Children's Center, a residency training pediatric clinic associated with the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, relocated to the second floor of the downtown Flint Farmers' Market. Immediately following this move, the clinic and the farmers' market created a program to encourage families to shop at the farmers' market by giving pediatric patients \$15 prescriptions for fresh fruits and vegetables that can be redeemed at the market.

Flint is considered a food desert because it

features a limited number of full-service grocery stores within city limits. About 60 percent of the city's kids live in poverty, and many [children](#) don't consume enough nutrient-dense foods while also eating too many poor-quality, calorie-dense foods.

"Fruit and [vegetable](#) intake tracks from childhood to adulthood, making it important for [health care professionals](#) to guide children towards healthy eating early on," said lead researcher Amy Saxe-Custack, assistant professor at Michigan State University and nutrition director of the Michigan State University-Hurley Children's Hospital Pediatric Public Health Initiative. "We need to consider not only nutrition education but also barriers to access and affordability of fresh fruits and vegetables, particularly in underserved areas. The prescription program is a first step to introducing fresh, high-quality produce to children."

Saxe-Custack will present results from the new study at the American Society for Nutrition annual meeting, [Nutrition 2018](#), held June 9-12, 2018 in Boston.

Through interviews, the researchers found that caregivers whose children received a [fruit](#) and vegetable prescription from their pediatrician were significantly more likely to shop at the farmers' market than those who did not receive a prescription. Caregivers also perceived the program as effective in improving food security, food access and dietary patterns of children.

"The caregivers shared their heartfelt appreciation for the physicians and medical staff who introduced the prescriptions," said Saxe-Custack. "Some talked about how they enjoy visiting the farmers' market with their kids and guiding the children to use the prescriptions for their favorite fruits and vegetables. Others described how they hold on to the prescriptions until they reach \$30 to \$40 and redeem them at the [market](#) when [food](#) dollars are limited."

The researchers recently received funding through Michigan Health Endowment Fund to expand the prescription program in Flint and to evaluate its impact. With this funding, they will partner with Flint Fresh Mobile Market and allow families to redeem their [prescriptions](#) at either the Flint Farmers' Market or at Flint Fresh Mobile Market, which includes on-line or telephone ordering of locally-grown produce boxes delivered directly to people who live or work in Flint. This expansion will help the researchers to create a model program that may be replicated in other areas.

More information: Amy Saxe-Custack will present this research during the Community and Public Health Nutrition Challenges and Interventions on Tuesday, June 12, from 9-9:45 a.m. in the Hynes Convention Center, Room 208 ([abstract](#)).

Provided by Nutrition 2018

APA citation: Fruit and vegetable prescriptions encourage children to eat healthy (2018, June 12) retrieved 4 December 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-06-fruit-vegetable-prescriptions-children-healthy.html>

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