

NEWSHEALTH

Program seeks to chart health improvements with fresh foods in underserved communities

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A federal grant is funding a Nassau program studying whether eating fresh produce helps improve the health of people with chronic illnesses in underserved communities. Credit: Fotolia

Public health officials are studying how effectively a diet of fresh fruits and vegetables can help improve the health of those with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease, who are living in underserved communities.

The Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County, Hofstra University and Harmony Healthcare Long Island plan to monitor 350 selected patients with ailments who also face food insecurity, to determine if biweekly deliveries of produce can improve their conditions and reduce stress.

“In communities of need, there are many barriers to better health and healthy eating, if it’s too expensive or lack transportation and access to fresh and healthy food,” Borukhov said. “Another factor is time. If people don’t have time to commit to a healthy lifestyle, fast food is fast and easier.”

The program received a \$483,589 Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to run the program through 2026.

Nicole Borukhov, Cornell Cooperative’s nutrition health and wellness program manager, said the program will begin in Hempstead and Roosevelt, regions identified as “food deserts” where low-income families may have limited access to fresh produce.

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Partners with Harmony Healthcare will help screen regular patients with diet-related conditions, such as prediabetes, type-2 diabetes, heart disease and obesity, she said. Participants may also qualify if they receive low-income food benefits such as SNAP, WIC or Medicaid.

Harmony Healthcare and students with Hofstra University’s Public Health program will review health care data of participants to chart progress and any improvement resulting from a healthy diet. Health care officials will also monitor factors such as blood pressure and blood sugar levels.

“We will see how effective it is to improve the clinical outcomes of participants and emotional and psychosocial health,” said Associate Professor Martine Hackett, director of the public health program. “The concept of food as a medicine is gaining a lot of strength in the scientific and medical community. In public health, it’s acknowledging the significance food plays in health outcomes.”

The program is also aimed at seeing whether a diet of fresh food can add to, or be an alternative to, certain prescription drugs like popular weight loss drugs.

“Rather than only prescribing medication, there’s evidence the choices of what you eat can affect diabetes weight loss and heart disease,” Borukhov said.

Recipients will be chosen in February and in June, and will receive about a 20-lb. box of food every other week for up to six months, Borukhov said. The food boxes are valued at about \$40. Food will be harvested and purchased from farms in Riverhead and other local farms and include culturally appropriate foods. Participants will also be given cooking skills and recipes.

“If you get a box of produce and not know what to do with it, we’re enrolling people to get a handle on what their needs are and as high touch as possible,” Borukhov said. “We’re trying to make them comfortable with what they’re getting so there’s not a ton of waste.”