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Produce Rx for more healthful lives

New fruit and vegetable prescriptions provide money for low-income families to shop at farmers markets. (Ceiling and Visibility Unlimited)

Can an apple a day really keep the doctor away? A new program that offers fruit and vegetable prescriptions aims to find out.

The initiative, which launches at several community health centers in Massachusetts this week, will offer families with obese children "fruit and veggie prescriptions," each of which is good for $2.50 worth of produce purchased at local farmers markets. A family of four will get about 10 prescriptions each week of the farmers market season. In exchange, doctors will chart patients' body mass index (BMI), a measure used to estimate healthy body weight, and blood pressure levels in an effort to determine whether healthful eating can help fight obesity in underserved communities.

"There is a lot of data that shows when a personal physician tells someone that they are overweight, they are more likely to act," said Shikha Anand, a doctor and the medical director of the nonprofit Ceiling and Visibility Unlimited's (CAVU) Healthy Weight Initiative in Boston. "Our goal is to see if there is a measurable effect on obesity when people eat more fruits and vegetables."

The program is starting small. This summer, three Massachusetts health centers will prescribe about $20,000 of vouchers to about 50 families. Doctors in Portland and Skowhegan, Maine, will soon begin to write prescriptions. Each family member will receive $1 per day or $28 per week for a family of four. That is the estimated amount required to purchase one additional serving of fruits and vegetables per person per day.

Funders such as Wholesome Wave, a foundation that aims to bring healthful, fresh food into underserved neighborhoods, are optimistic the idea will catch on. The nonprofit has a successful record of creating innovative healthful eating programs: Its hallmark initiative is its Double Value Coupon program, which motivates shoppers on food assistance, such as food stamps and WIC, to spend their money at farmers markets. Launched in 2008 at five pilot locations, Wholesome Wave funds double-

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Serious Eats

voucher coupons at 160 farmers markets in 18 states and the District of Columbia.

"Each dollar put into the Fruit and Veggie Prescription Program does more than just reinforce healthy, proactive eating habits," said Michel Nischan, founder and chief executive of Wholesome Wave. "These prescriptions have the power to directly benefit small- and medium-scale farmers and to bring additional resources into the local economies of underserved urban and rural communities."

In addition to aiding low-income families, the program hopes to collect scientifically significant data about how and whether increasing fruit-and-vegetable intake affects human health. The data will grow richer as more doctors join the program. But Anand said she is hopeful that she will have a picture of whether the program is working by the end of the East Coast growing season.

-- Jane Black

By Jane Black | June 24, 2010; 7:00 AM ET
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