

## VIEWPOINTS

# The Foundational Role of Healthy Food in Fighting Chronic Disease

New survey of America's physicians examines how gaps in access to healthy foods are impacting chronic disease outcomes and what it will take to close them.



Chronic disease is diagnosed in the exam room, but too often driven by whether patients can access the healthy food needed to follow clinical guidance. Physicians are charged with preventing diet-related disease, but practice in a healthcare system that does not support one of the most important clinical tools available: nutritious food.

The Physicians Foundation is directed by physicians and chief executives of 20 state and county medical societies representing hundreds of thousands of primary care doctors and specialists, including in Texas, Nebraska, Louisiana, Florida, New Jersey, South Carolina, and more. Many of these are hometown doctors in small and independent practices.

In 2026, the Foundation surveyed over 1,000 frontline U.S. physicians to examine barriers to addressing chronic disease outcomes and what it will take to address them.

## Key Findings

A 2026 Physicians Foundation Survey found:

- 78% of physicians report treating patients at least monthly whose **chronic disease management is compromised by lack of access to healthy food** – and 23% encounter these patients daily.
- 45% of physicians say drivers of health, such as access to nutritious food, **frequently drive worsening clinical indicators** (e.g., A1c, blood pressure).
- 68% of physicians support **insurance coverage of healthy food benefits** for patients with chronic conditions.

Physicians are clear: Nutrition is foundational to disease prevention and treatment. Without access to healthy food, even the best medical care falls short.

*"My patient came in for a routine procedure only to be rushed to intensive care with life-threatening blood sugar levels. What she experienced was scary, expensive, and wholly avoidable. It didn't have to be this way. From a clinical standpoint, the right treatment to prevent diabetes is straightforward: healthy food and nutrition counseling – and then medication, if needed."*

*- OB/GYN, Denton, Texas*

# What's Working & Where Policy Falls Short

Federal policy is increasingly focused on prevention, acting on well-documented evidence that access to nutritious food [improves health outcomes](#) and reduces healthcare [utilization](#) and [spending](#). Under this Administration's leadership, [hospitals](#) are now required to provide nutrient-dense food and over 70 [medical schools](#) have committed to strengthening nutrition education.

Yet, Medicare Advantage (MA), which covers over 35 million Americans, has not kept pace. The primary pathway for MA food benefits, Special Supplemental Benefits for the Chronically Ill (SSBCI), does not support prevention. Rather, patients must first get sicker – even be hospitalized – before they can access nutrition interventions.

This creates a fundamental disconnect: physicians are expected to prevent disease; healthy food is recognized as a key clinical intervention to do so; but outdated MA rules stand in the way of patients accessing it. The result is accelerated disease progression, avoidable healthcare utilization, and unnecessary costs – a recipe for government waste.

## Recommendation: CMS Should Recognize Healthy Food as a Primarily Health Related Benefit

CMS can address this gap by issuing guidance that **nutritious food is a primarily health related supplemental benefit** when used to prevent or manage chronic disease. Requiring no new legislation and no increase in spending, this approach would:

- Align MA policy with clinical best practices and physician training;
- Empower physicians to engage patients in making healthy choices;
- Hold health plans accountable for delivering preventive nutrition benefits; and
- Advance Administration priorities to address root causes of chronic disease and eliminate waste.

To ensure consistency, quality, and impact, **CMS should establish clear guardrails to ensure nutritious food benefits:**

- Align with the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans, prioritizing nutrient-dense foods and excluding highly processed food; and
- Maintain a clear clinical focus, distinguishing nutritious food as a well-established clinical intervention, not an entitlement or income supplement.

*"From my decades as a gastroenterologist, I know first-hand the essential role of physicians on the front lines of fighting chronic disease and, in particular, how crucial healthy food is as a tool in doing so."*

*- Gastroenterologist, West Columbia, South Carolina*

Prevention only works if patients can access the tools required to follow care plans. By issuing common sense guidance recognizing nutritious food as a primarily health related benefit, CMS can align its policies with clinical practice and advance our shared goal of addressing the root causes of chronic disease. Physicians across the country are ready to act. Now, policy must meet them there.

## About The Physicians Foundation

The Physicians Foundation is a public charity seeking to advance the work of practicing physicians and help them facilitate the delivery of high-quality health care to patients. As the U.S. health care system continues to evolve, The Physicians Foundation is steadfast in strengthening the physician-patient relationship, supporting medical practices' sustainability and helping physicians navigate the changing health care system. The Physicians Foundation pursues its mission through research, education and innovative grant making that improves physician wellbeing, strengthens physician leadership, addresses drivers of health and lifts physician perspectives. For more information, visit [www.physiciansfoundation.org](http://www.physiciansfoundation.org).