

UAMS News Bureau

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UAMS Spearheads Project to Increase Healthy Options at Food Pantries

FAYETTEVILLE – Three local food pantries that participated in a study with the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) increased their distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables by more than three servings per person per household.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 5 percent of all U.S. households reported using a food pantry in 2017. Additional research shows that the nutritional quality of pantry food is inadequate for a healthy diet and that pantry clients' fruit and vegetable consumption falls short of recommendations. People who experience food insecurity are also at increased risk for diabetes, hypertension and obesity. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables is important to addressing these cardiometabolic diseases.

UAMS researchers are evaluating ways to improve the nutritional quality of foods distributed by food pantries. In an article in "Preventing Chronic Disease," researchers from the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus published their results, which showed an increase from 0.22 to 3.33 servings of fresh fruits and vegetables distributed per person per household.

"A surprising finding was that at the beginning of the project, we determined that more than 99 percent of the fresh fruit and vegetables distributed from these pantries were apples," said Chris Long, Ph.D., assistant professor and senior director of research. "However, at our follow-up evaluation, there was much greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. At the follow-up, there were 29 percent strawberries, 13.6 percent tomatoes, 13.5 percent onions, 10.6 percent apples and 33.2 percent other fruits and vegetables."

These results were due to policy, systems and environmental changes that were implemented at the three participating food pantries. The changes included the development of food donation lists that requested healthier options from donors, educational materials and recipes in English, Spanish and Marshallese (the primary language for most Pacific Islander clients of the pantries), approaches to displaying and distributing educational materials and recipes to clients and discussions across pantries to share ideas about sourcing healthy foods.

The researchers acknowledged that one limitation of the study included the small number of pantries evaluated due to the time investment required to capture, process and analyze this first-of-its-kind data set of nutrient information for food distributed to about 1,500 client household members.

“This study shows the promise of food pantry interventions to increase fresh fruits and vegetables,” said Long. “We are building on those successes to develop more comprehensive interventions to more broadly support pantry clients’ health. Future efforts will include a wider range of policies and procedures and include partnerships with food banks, which is where pantries get much of the food they distribute.”

Pearl McElfish Ph.D., vice chancellor of the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus, said that “this research is part of the UAMS Northwest Campus’ commitment to creating a healthy food system in Northwest Arkansas that supports all residents in living healthy and long lives. At UAMS, we want to ensure we are helping those who need health care and also helping people stay well so that they don’t need to go to the hospital.”

The UAMS research was funded in part by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program.

The article, titled “Intervention to Improve Access to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Among Arkansas Food Pantry Clients,” can be found online at https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2019/18_0155.htm. The researchers and co-authors include Chris Long, Ph.D.; Brett Rowland, M.A.; and Pearl A. McElfish, Ph.D.

UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 2,727 students, 870 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state’s largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health.

The UAMS Northwest Regional Campus includes 250 medical, pharmacy, nursing and health professions students, 50 medical and pharmacy residents, and 1,000 community-based faculty. The campus has nine clinics providing advanced health care. Faculty conduct research to improve community health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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