

THE NEED FOR PHYSICIAN REFERRAL OF LOW-INCOME, CHRONIC DISEASE
PATIENTS TO FREE COMMUNITY NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by

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(Abstract)

There is a high prevalence of chronic diseases and conditions among older, low-income individuals in the United States. It is well recognized that diet plays an important role in the management and prevention of chronic diseases. Despite this, primary-care physicians often do not provide adequate dietary counseling or appropriate nutrition referrals to this patient population.

Two surveys were conducted in Southwest and the western part of Central Virginia, one with 209 family practitioners and internists and the other with 57 low-income participants in the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP). The FSNEP clients were aged 40 years or older, had been enrolled in FSNEP for four months or less, and had a diet-related chronic disease or condition.

Eighty-one percent of physicians reported that they provide nutrition advice to their chronic disease patients on a regular basis. Most physicians further stated that they make a limited number of referrals to registered dietitians and very few referrals to community nutrition education programs. FSNEP clients were generally dissatisfied with their primary-care physician's provision of nutrition information and indicated a desire for more dietary guidance.

Results indicate a need for primary-care physician referrals to free community nutrition education services that tailor their programs to the patient's socioeconomic situation. These referrals may improve the nutrition health of older, low-income patients and help manage their chronic diseases. Informational brochures need to be developed and distributed to primary-care physicians informing them of the positive attributes of free community nutrition education programs, such as FSNEP.