

## EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

## Food as Medicine Employers, It's Time to EAT

By Gina Julian, *Managing Consultant*,  
Emma Collins, *Consultant* and Jackie  
Woods, *Senior Analyst*



When you hear the phrase “Food as Medicine”, do you think of doctors prescribing fruits and vegetables to patients? Or perhaps you envision a well-balanced meal being delivered to someone’s house? Perhaps you think of a food pantry – someplace where nourishing food is easily accessible? All the above impressions are correct. Food as Medicine is the concept of using food to not just fuel our bodies, but to help our bodies stay healthy and fight diseases. So what is this “Food as Medicine” that is likely all over your newsfeeds, and why as an employer should you take notice?

### A Primer for Employers

Not all food is created equally – the connection between what we put in our bodies and how it impacts our health (for better or worse) is not a secret. The Western diet – characterized by consuming too much sugar, fat, salt, and processed food, which most people in the U.S. (and increasingly globally) are subjected to – has been linked to higher risks of developing chronic conditions, cancers and even Alzheimer’s disease.<sup>1</sup> To put it bluntly, we as a society are repeatedly feeding our bodies with foods that are hurting our health. In the US, more than two-thirds of adults (ages 20+) are either overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, many groups, providers and employers, are realizing that food itself should be part of any chronic condition prevention/management strategy. That’s where the Food as Medicine concept comes into play – using

*healthy* food to prevent poor health outcomes and better manage well-being.

Unfortunately, access to healthy food is also not equal, which means that people experiencing food insecurity will often have higher rates of chronic disease such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, hepatitis, stroke, cancer, asthma, diabetes, arthritis, obesity, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and kidney disease.<sup>2</sup> As pandemic relief measures continue to phase out and food costs continue to rise, food insecurity is becoming increasingly prominent. Approximately 33.8 million people currently live in food-insecure households and 12.5% of those households include children.<sup>3</sup> An even greater number, 44.2 million people in the US, said they could not afford to eat at some point in 2022.<sup>4</sup>



## How to EAT

With the important and concerning situation outlined above, the good news is that employers have the opportunity to incorporate the Food as Medicine movement into their overall health and well-being strategy. By considering the “EAT” approach, employers can increase access, improve quality and remove cost barriers to nutritious foods. Here’s how:

### Establish the Right Programs

Making it easier for employees to access quality food will not only address possible food insecurity issues, but also help with the prevention and management of chronic conditions. Programs such as these can help improve access to nutritious foods and the quality of food that employees are choosing to consume:

- **Vendors.** Work with vendors such as [Foodsmart](#), [Season Health](#), or [similar vendors](#) to help remove barriers to nutritional counseling and increase access to nutritious food through discounted delivery services. Some of these vendors even help qualified individuals enroll in programs like [SNAP](#) and [WIC](#). And depending on the health insurance carrier or TPA, these vendors may already be part of your ecosystem!
- **Teaching Kitchen Programs.** Implement an onsite [Teaching Kitchen](#) to help employees learn ways to eat, cook, move, and think more healthfully.
- **Well-being Reimbursements.** Offer a well-being reimbursement account, which helps reduce the financial barrier to accessing locally grown healthy produce.

### Adjust Your Work Environment

Creating a work environment conducive to healthy eating and nutrition can help employees build healthy habits that last a lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Employers can encourage the consumption of healthy foods through:

- **Onsite Food.** Offer healthy snacks throughout the office, at catered events and in onsite cafeterias. Make the healthy food choice the easy food choice for your employees.
- **Food Subsidies.** Subsidize healthy meals in onsite cafes, take-home meals and/or healthy food delivery options. If you have an onsite cafeteria, work with your vendor to see if they can accept SNAP/EBT cards. For locations with a higher prevalence of food insecure employees, consider adding an onsite food pantry. Make healthy food easy and affordable!
- **Positive Food Culture.** Normalize employee celebrations and rewards that offer delicious and nutritious foods or non-food options (e.g., flowers, donations, time off).<sup>6</sup>

## Tailor Your Plan Design

Strategic plan design changes can support employees trying to reduce chronic condition risk factors and those actively managing chronic conditions. Since food insecurity increases the probability of chronic disease, employers can examine these possible health plan modifications<sup>2,7</sup>:

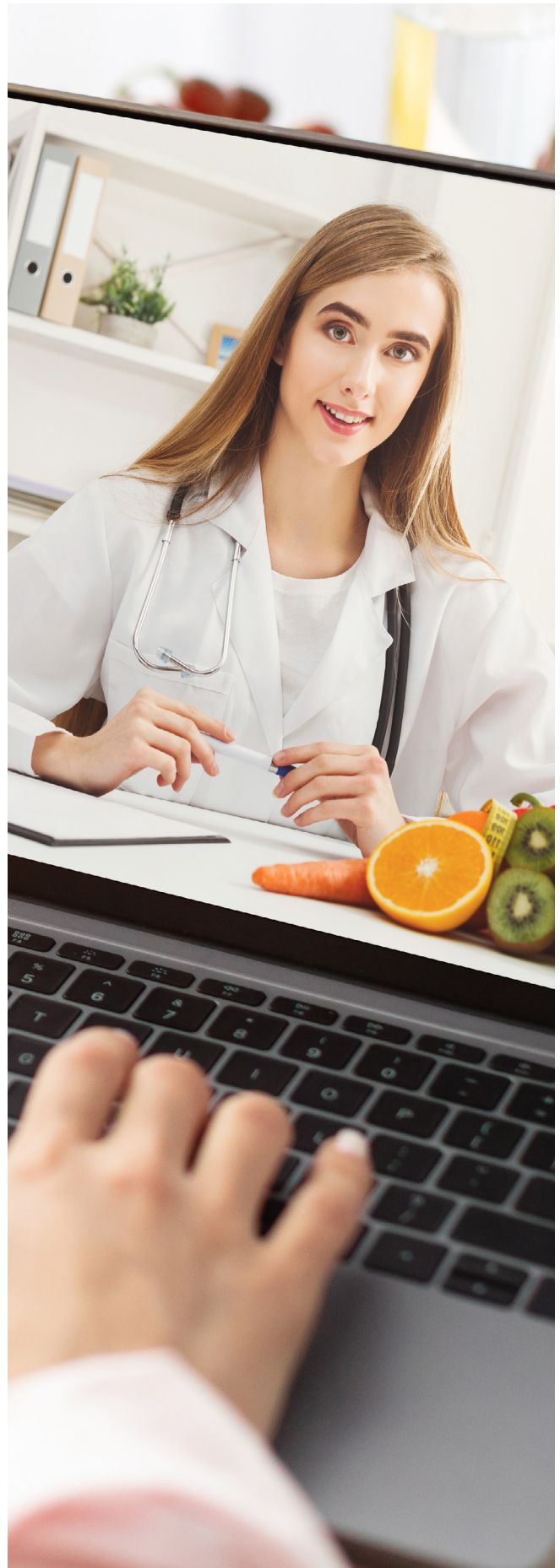
- **Medically Tailored Meals (MTMs).** Some employees' chronic conditions require a specific diet to manage the severity of their condition or treatment.<sup>8</sup> Consider including MTMs in your plan design to support employees that may not be able to prepare condition-appropriate meals.
- **Registered Dietitian (RD) Coverage.** Consider increasing the number of RD sessions and/or removing any required pre-authorization. This can make it easier for employees to receive targeted guidance on how to eat healthfully based on their personal goals and/or conditions.
- **Produce Prescriptions.** To address specific health conditions, some healthcare providers write a "prescription" for free or discounted produce that are redeemed at retail grocers, farmers' markets, or Community Supported Agriculture programs.<sup>9</sup> Educate employees on produce prescriptions and work with your insurance carrier to see how this practice can be supported by local in-network providers.

The Food as Medicine movement is actually quite simple and straightforward; use food to help better manage health. The above "EAT" approach does just that – by helping to increase food security and making healthy food easily available, which ultimately decreases the risk and costs of chronic and other poor health conditions. So, as an employer, if you are hungry for a better way to help manage your employees' health, remember to EAT.

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## About the Authors



### **Gina Julian MS, RD, *Managing Consultant***

Gina is a Managing Consultant and a registered dietitian specializing in Well-Being and Population Health practices. In her role, she helps oversee the implementation, delivery, assessment and analysis of customers' well-being programs. Gina has worked in corporate well-being for over ten years and spent three years working for a cooking-based nutrition education nonprofit (Cooking Matters). Gina received her BA from Bates College and her Master's in Nutrition Sciences from Boston University.



### **Emma Collins, *Population Health & Well-Being Consultant***

Emma is a Consultant, specializing in Population Health & Well-Being. In her role, Emma assists with the implementation, delivery, assessment and analysis of clients' well-being programs. She earned a BS in Health Policy & Management and minors in Community Health and Finance from Providence College.



### **Jackie Wood, *Population Health & Well-Being Senior Analyst***

Jackie is a Senior Analyst specializing in Population Health & Well-Being. She brings years of experience working in employee benefits, with a well-rounded perspective of the client and consultant relationship. Prior to joining Brown & Brown, Jackie spent the first two years of her career working as a senior benefits specialist at Supplemental Healthcare. She holds a BBA degree from the University of Kentucky.



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