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### **Global review highlights key design features for effective healthy food voucher programs**

A new narrative review from researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Chile synthesizes global evidence on Healthy Food Voucher Programs. These voucher programs provide monetary non-cash benefits—via vouchers, tokens, or electronic cards to low-income populations for purchasing healthy and nutritious foods. There is an increasing interest in these programs, as they can be used to complement fiscal policies (i.e. sweetened beverage tax and ultra-processed foods tax) to improve populations' diets and improve equity.

The study reviewed Healthy Food Voucher Programs to identify how their structure influences their potential to improve diet quality and health outcomes. The review included 54 studies from 13 countries<sup>1</sup> and evaluated outcomes across key areas including: program eligibility and enrollment, participation and use, and nutrition-related outcomes, including healthy food purchases and consumption, food security, diet quality, physical and mental health.

#### **Key findings:**

- Enrollment and participation are two main structural areas that influence how participants can effectively access and benefit from Healthy Food Voucher Programs:
  - Enrollment and Eligibility: Overall, researchers found that careful eligibility criteria are needed to ensure resources get to those most in need. Most programs use income or poverty level thresholds for eligibility, while others measure from national household surveys. Requiring proof of need can result in increased stigma and increase administrative burden. Achieving high enrollment of eligible participants is essential for voucher programs to have a positive impact on health and nutrition. Researchers noted that both in-person and remote enrollment processes can be used and that remote enrollment helped reduce transportation cost and increase accessibility, resulting in higher enrollment of eligible participants.
  - Participation and use: The review noted that effective implementation and participant engagement depend on several design features. These include delivering benefits in user-friendly formats (such as prepaid cards), benefit amounts that are adjusted for household size, inflation, and culturally appropriate food choices. Success also relied on partnering with context-appropriate and accessible retail venues like supermarkets and farmers' markets, offering engaging nutrition education (e.g., cooking workshops), and ensuring programs run long enough to support lasting dietary improvement.
- Healthy Food Voucher Programs can lead to increased healthy food purchases and improved household food security:

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<sup>1</sup> Mongolia, United States of America, Indonesia, United Kingdom, Canada, Scotland, South Korea, France, Ethiopia, Ecuador, Cameroon, Haiti, and Wales.



- Healthy food purchases and consumption: Most programs reported increased purchases and intake of eligible foods. For example, fruit and vegetable voucher programs in Ethiopia, France, and the U.S. showed significant improvements in consumption of healthy foods after the program as compared with baseline.
- Food security: Voucher programs consistently improved household food security in both high-income and low- and middle-income countries. Even when programs' dietary quality improvements were not significant, food security still improved. In British Columbia, for example, food insecurity reductions persisted 16 weeks post-intervention.
- Diet quality: Researchers noted that improvements were more likely to happen when benefits were long-term, consistent, and sufficient versus short-term, low benefit amount programs.
- Nutrition Knowledge: Programs that included education component enhanced participants' nutrition knowledge. Experiential learning (e.g., cooking workshops) was more effective than informational education (e.g., handing out flyers).
- Physical health outcomes: Studies reported improvements in child nutrition indicators such as stunting and arm circumference.
- Authors noted some limitations of Healthy Food Voucher Programs, including the following:
  - The programs are typically short-term interventions, lasting from only a few weeks to several months.
  - A limited number of benefits/financial resources may deter improvements in diet quality.
  - Lack of long-term evaluations due to challenges such as difficulty recruiting control groups to track and compare behavioral and health outcomes over time.

### Key messages:

- Healthy Food Voucher Programs are a promising strategy to improve dietary quality and reduce nutritional disparities across all countries, regardless of income.
- Effective program design should include adequate benefit amounts, flexible delivery, culturally appropriate food options, and engaging nutrition education.
- Policymakers should consider integrating long-term Healthy Food Voucher Programs within fiscal policies to support low-income populations and improve public health outcomes.

### Citation:

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