Global Health Advocacy Incubator

June 2026

How Cash Transfers Can Support Healthier Diets Among Older Adults in Colombia

Two new studies by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill examine Colombia Mayor, a national unconditional cash transfer program for low-income older adults. Together, the studies show that providing income support can improve diets, but the nutritional return depends on how the program is designed and on whether beneficiaries can reach food retailers.

Cash transfers are widely used to reduce poverty and strengthen purchasing power. Yet more cash does not automatically produce a healthier diet, particularly in later life, when fixed incomes, established habits, mobility constraints and limited food access can shape what people buy. Most previous nutrition research on cash transfers has focused on children, mothers or the general population. These studies address an important evidence gap by focusing on older adults and by examining not only whether cash works, but also how transfer amount, recipient characteristics, payment frequency and food access influence its nutritional impact.

1. *Can cash improve diet quality in old age? Evidence from a large-scale unconditional transfer* (published in *World Development*): This study evaluated whether eligibility for Colombia Mayor improved diet quality and food-related behaviors. Using nationally representative Colombian Quality of Life Survey data from 2020–2022 and a regression discontinuity design based on the program's age-eligibility thresholds, the researchers examined diet quality, food-group purchasing, food expenditure and consumption of ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages. The study also assessed whether results differed by sex, age, transfer intensity and proximity to food retailers.

Key Findings:

- Colombia Mayor improved diet quality, with the clearest gains among households with female beneficiaries. Their diet-quality score increased by 9.8% at the household level.
- Among female beneficiaries, protein purchasing increased, while the likelihood of consuming ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages during the week fell by 14% and 12%, respectively.
- Food expenditure increased for both female and male beneficiaries, but improvements in diet quality were stronger for women, suggesting that who receives the transfer may influence how resources are used.
- Transfer intensity mattered: households with two female beneficiaries experienced more than twice the diet-quality gain estimated for households with one female beneficiary.
- Food access shaped the return on the transfer. Diet quality improved among households within a 20-minute walk of a food store or market, while effects were limited or negative among households farther away.
- Although the nutritional gain became smaller at older ages, beneficiaries maintained higher diet-quality scores than comparable non-beneficiaries across the age distribution.

2. *Timing Matters: How Unconditional Cash Transfer Frequency Shapes Dietary Choices Among Vulnerable Older Adults* (published in *Health Economics*): This study asked a different policy question: does it matter how often beneficiaries receive the same type of support? Using the 2020–2022 Quality of Life Survey, the researchers compared eligible non-beneficiaries, monthly recipients and recipients paid once every two months. A multivalued treatment approach with doubly robust estimation accounted for observed differences among these groups. The study examined food expenditure, purchases of protein, vegetables and fruits, consumption of ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages, and overall diet quality.

Key Findings:

- Monthly recipients had better overall diet quality than recipients paid once every two months. The bimonthly group's diet-quality score was 9.6% lower than the monthly group's score.
- Compared with eligible non-beneficiaries, monthly payments increased weekly purchases of protein, vegetables and fruit and reduced daily consumption of ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages.
- The direct comparison between payment schedules showed that bimonthly recipients were less likely than monthly recipients to purchase vegetables and fruit, and were more likely to consume ultra-processed foods.
- Bimonthly recipients reported lower satisfaction with their income than monthly recipients. This finding is consistent with the idea that regular, predictable payments can improve perceived financial security and support healthier budgeting.
- Payment design should reflect local access. Monthly payments worked better overall and among people closer to food retailers, while less frequent payments showed an advantage among the smaller group living farther away, where combining resources for fewer shopping trips may be useful.
- The study estimated a lower delivery cost per diet-quality point for monthly payments ($3.53) than for bimonthly payments ($5.86).

Key Messages

- Cash transfers can do more than reduce income poverty: when well designed, they can also support healthier aging and better nutrition.
- The central policy lesson is not simply "give more cash." The architecture of the transfer matters—who receives it, how much they receive, how often and reliably it arrives, and whether nutritious food is accessible.
- Frequent, predictable payments can help low-income older adults avoid financial shortfalls between payments and maintain a more diverse, nutritious diet. Administrative savings from less frequent delivery should be weighed against possible losses in nutritional effectiveness.
- Women may be especially effective recipients for improving household nutrition, but programs should examine gender differences in resource allocation rather than assume that the same payment produces the same response for everyone.
- Cash alone cannot overcome poor food access. Income support should be coordinated with measures that improve physical access to affordable, nutritious foods, especially for older adults with mobility constraints.
- The studies' innovation is their combined focus on an understudied population and on program design: one provides evidence on how a large national cash transfer affects diet quality in later life, while the other is among the first real-world, nationally representative studies to test how payment frequency shapes nutrition among low-income older adults.

Citations:

Guzman-Tordecilla, D. N., Trujillo, A., Ng, S. W., & Vecino-Ortiz, A. I. (2026). Can cash improve diet quality in old age? Evidence from a large-scale unconditional transfer. World Development, 202, 107370. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2026.107370

Guzman-Tordecilla, D. N., Trujillo, A., Vecino-Ortiz, A. I., & Ng, S. W. (2026). Timing Matters: How Unconditional Cash Transfer Frequency Shapes Dietary Choices Among Vulnerable Older Adults. Health Economics. https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.70116