Federal Food Program Puts Food on the Table, But Dietary Quality Could Be Improved

ATLANTA – September 23, 2014 –A new American Cancer Society study suggests that participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as the food stamp program, had lower dietary quality scores compared with income eligible non-participants. The authors say the findings emphasize the need to bolster programs aimed at enhancing the dietary quality of SNAP participants.

The SNAP program aims to assist low-income individuals and households with the resources to obtain a nutritionally adequate diet. In 2013, approximately 47.6 million individuals, or about one in seven Americans, participated in the program. Although SNAP aims to help families "put food on the table" and prevent food insecurity, some studies have found that SNAP participation is also linked to increased likelihood of weight gain and obesity. The 2014 Farm Bill included several provisions aimed at facilitating and encouraging SNAP participants to eat healthier, including requiring SNAP retailers to carry foods from a range of food groups and more fresh foods and creating a pilot program to provide for grants to test the use of incentives to encourage fruit and vegetable purchases by SNAP participants.. SNAP-Ed, the nutrition education companion to the SNAP program, has been revamped in recent years with the goal of promoting healthier food choices.

For their study, published in Mayo Clinic Proceedings, researchers led by Binh T. Nguyen, PhD, of the American Cancer Society, explored the diet quality of SNAP participants using data from a nationally representative sample of over 4,000 adult Americans from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2003-2010 (NHANES).

Their analyses revealed that compared with low-income nonparticipants, SNAP participants had lower dietary quality scores overall and lower scores for fruits and vegetables, seafood and plant proteins, and had higher intake of empty calories. The groups had comparable scores on intakes of whole grains, refined grain, total dairy, total protein, fatty acid, and sodium. The researchers found that the relationship between SNAP participation and lower dietary quality was primarily observed in women, Hispanics, young adults and those who were food secure.

"The results suggest a need for interventions that encourage a healthier diet among SNAP participants in general but also particularly in the subgroups we've identified as being particularly at risk," said Dr. Nguyen. "We do, however, want to emphasize the importance of SNAP; our findings underscore the need for additional education, incentives, and other interventions to make sure not only that people are getting calories, but also that they're getting them from the right foods."

Additional coauthors on the study include Dr. Kerem Shuval of the American Cancer Society, and Drs. Valentine Y. Njike and David L. Katz of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center.

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