Supporting Optimal Nutrition from Early Childhood Through Adolescence

Malnourished children and adolescents suffer from poorer physical and mental health outcomes than their peers.\(^1\) The health and developmental problems associated with hunger put children at higher risk for hospitalizations and more frequent doctor visits, resulting in higher health care spending for families and employers.\(^2\) Health plans can play an important role in ensuring that these vulnerable age groups have consistent access to healthy foods, thereby improving health throughout the lifespan and preventing unnecessary health expenditures.\(^3\)

Unfortunately, too many children and youth in the United States lack adequate nutrition, which prevents them from thriving in their physical and mental development and educational and extracurricular activities. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently reported that approximately ten percent of households with children, roughly 3.9 million households, were food insecure in 2011; meaning, at some time during the year these households were unable to provide adequate food for their children.\(^4\) Compounding this problem is the fact that families who experience food insecurity may be even less likely to consume healthy and nutritious foods because very often this food is more costly and less available than highly processed, unhealthy food.\(^5\)

It is important to ensure that children and adolescents have consistent access to nutritious foods and to limit consumption of unhealthy foods and additives, such as sodium and sugar, which are associated with negative health outcomes in children and teens. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently examined sodium and sugar consumption among children and youth in the United States and found that they consume significantly higher amounts of both than is recommended.\(^6,7\) These children and adolescents are at increased risk of developing risk factors for cardiovascular disease such as increased blood pressure and high cholesterol.\(^8,9\) Furthermore, children who are obese may be more likely than their peers to experience high blood pressure as a result of increased sodium consumption.\(^10\) Therefore it is important for health plans to better understand the eating habits of young people in their states, which can help inform their outreach and educational efforts focused on nutrition. Health plans can learn more about the nutritional status and habits of youth in their states, including fruit and vegetable servings consumed per day, through the Office of Adolescent Health’s searchable map.

The USDA’s strategic plan has set a goal to ensure that all children in America have access to safe, nutritious and balanced meals by 2015.\(^11\) To achieve this goal, the USDA has created specific objectives that health plans can support, including increased access to nutritious food and promotion of healthy diet and physical activity behaviors. Health plans are already taking steps to help their members achieve optimal well-being through healthy and nutritious eating.
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota provides detailed information on childhood nutrition to its members through an online portal powered by an outside vendor, Krames Staywell. By educating members about the importance of proper nutrition and promoting a healthy diet from infancy through adolescence, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota hopes to have a positive impact on the nutritional choices of its members.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts has granted funds to implement a comprehensive nutrition education program to influence the eating habits of 200 kindergarten children and their families at three elementary schools in Holyoke, MA. BCBSMA also supports an initiative aimed at improving the quality of meals served to children in the Head Start program and their families. This initiative involves broad nutrition education, including shopping trips and cooking lessons, and seeks to become a national model that will revamp the way children in Head Start eat both in the program and at home.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina is leading a new initiative Nourishing North Carolina that aims to help create or improve upon an existing community garden in every county in the state. Many people living in North Carolina, including children, have limited access to fresh produce. Through Nourishing North Carolina, BCBSNC hopes to increase access to nutritious food for all residents of the state.

BCBCNC’s philanthropic arm, the Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation has made investments to ensure that young children in child care centers throughout the state are served fresh, nutritious food every day through its Shape NC initiative, highlighted in a recent NIHCM fact sheet.

**Childhood nutrition resources for health plans, their members and provider networks**

- The Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Library at Georgetown University is dedicated to providing MCH professionals and families alike with the most up-to-date, accurate information on MCH issues. The Library houses a knowledge path dedicated to child and adolescent nutrition that contains links to relevant websites, electronic publications, databases, news and commentary, and resources for families and schools regarding child and adolescent nutrition.

- The National Institutes of Health, along with the National Library of Medicine host MedlinePlus, a website for the public that contains information on a variety of health issues, which includes a dedicated page on children’s nutrition issues.

- The USDA houses a website dedicated to educating the public about the agency’s activities surrounding food and nutrition, and it includes links to other federal initiatives regarding nutrition. The USDA’s National Agricultural Library hosts Nutrition.gov, a website for consumers that provides easy access to additional government information on food and nutrition.

- Partners in Information Access for the Public Health Workforce, a collaboration of 14 national organizations and U.S. government agencies provides timely, convenient
access to public health resources on the internet geared towards public health professionals. Partners houses a dedicated nutrition section, which contains information on and links to federal and international nutrition-centered organizations, nutrition research, data and statistics, grants and funding, legislation and policy, literature and reports, nutrition education and promotion, training and other resources, many of which are child and adolescent focused.

- The CDC's Nutrition Facts website contains information geared towards families about nutrition and the health of young people. The site includes information on the consequences of a poor diet as well as resources for those wishing to learn more about how to improve the nutrition of young people.

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3 Ibid.
7 Ervin RB, Kit BK, Carroll MD, Ogden CL. "Consumption of Added Sugar Among U.S. Children and Adolescents, 2005–2008," NCHS Data Brief 87; February 2012.
8 Yang et al.
9 Ervne et al.
10 Yang et al.