

Stanford experts' diet advice can help your patients eat smarter

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When research emerged in the 1960s confirming the health risks of smoking, it didn't take long for physicians to quit smoking and motivate their patients to quit too. Thanks in no small part to doctors' efforts, smoking rates among American adults have dropped from more than 42% in 1965 to under 14% today.

So what's keeping physicians from mounting a similar campaign against eating heavily processed foods? It could be that the lack of nutrition education in medical training isn't helping.

An education module offered via the AMA Ed Hub™ brings physicians up to date on well-established nutritional practices and also common barriers to healthy eating to help them be more empathetic, informed and effective partners to patients struggling with oversight and obesity.

The AMA Ed Hub is an online platform that consolidates high-quality CME, maintenance of certification and educational content you need—in one place—with activities relevant to you, automated credit tracking and reporting for some states and specialty boards.

The free online CME module "Introduction to Food and Health," developed by Stanford Medicine, is enduring material and designated by the AMA for a maximum of 2.5 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit™*.

Why nutrition matters

The incidence of diet-related preventable disease has increased dramatically in the U.S. in recent decades. Fewer meals are being cooked at home, and convenience foods—both packaged and restaurant made—are often prepared with only shelf life or flavor in mind, stripping them of their nutrients and loading them with excess salt, sugar and unhealthy fats.

The module goes into depth on:

- Macronutrient structure and metabolism.
- How a food's glycemic index affects blood-glucose levels and insulin response.
- The qualities and comparative benefits of animal and plant-based proteins.
- The varying effects of dietary fats on human health.

Where to start the conversation

The module also offers recommendations for talking with patients whose eating habits may be contributing to their health problems. You might start by simply asking them to walk you through what they eat and drink during a typical day and night.

Interviews with noted food writer Michael Pollan—who explains his mantra, "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants"—are featured throughout.

Healthy doesn't have to be hard

One of the solutions to the plague of processed foods is simply to cook more of our own meals, notes the module's host, Maya Adam, MD, director of health media innovation at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

While food companies often depict this foundational family activity as tedious and time consuming, just the opposite is true, she adds. Cooking meals at home can be fun and meaningful, and can take less time than ordering takeout. It also brings members of the household together and keeps people from eating meals unthinkingly in front of TV sets or computer screens, a practice shown to dramatically increase the quantity of food we eat.

The module highlights six fundamental ingredients every home cook should have on hand and offers a rule of thumb for the layout of a healthy plate. It also provides recommendations for finding sensible substitutions for unhealthy snacks and gives a practical tip for grocery shopping.

Break it into small, easy steps

Lastly, "Introduction to Food and Health" suggests a stepwise approach to making dietary changes, to avoid the all-or-nothing attitude that often scuttles patients' attempts at behavior change.

"Physicians who understand the relationship between food and medicine can often move the needle more than they expect with regard to their patients' eating behaviors, and they can do this just by regularly speaking with their patients about food," Dr. Adam says. "One of the most powerful messages physicians can convey is that even small changes can have a substantial positive impact on the patient's health."

The module includes a downloadable nutrition assessment form to use with patients.