



Health Care  Food



January 2026 Newsletter

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## Building the Future of Food-based Health Care Together

We start 2026 by introducing Health Care by Food's™ (HCXF) s Lived Experience Patient Advisory Board , whose voices ground our work in the realities, needs and aspirations of those most impacted by diet-related chronic diseases. Their insights guide us in shaping programs that are effective across populations, respectful of cultural norms and rooted in dignity.

We also celebrate the progress of our HCXF research grantees, whose innovative studies are expanding the evidence base for healthy food interventions in health care across diverse populations. Their discoveries will play a key role as we prepare for the American Heart Association's EPI Lifestyle 2026 Scientific Sessions in March, where emerging science in prevention, behavior and cardiometabolic health will take center stage.

Because cognitive health remains an urgent public priority, we highlight the MIND diet and its potential to support long-term brain health—reflecting the growing intersection between nutrition and neurological wellbeing. And finally, we share updates from our HCXF focus group work, which helps us better understand how patients, caregivers and communities experience healthy food in health care.

These stories reflect our collective commitment to building a future in which healthy food and health care are inseparable. Thank you for being part of this movement and for championing the science, stories and solutions that will define the next decade of nutrition forward health care.



Lisa D. Sanders  
National Executive Director  
Health Care by Food

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## A Seat at the Table: The Patient's Voice

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HCXF Lived Experience Patient Advisory Board member, Phalba Adams, discusses her journey with food is medicine. Click image to view video. *(ATB Productions)*

At the heart of Health Care by Food lies a commitment to designing food is medicine interventions for—and with—those we aim to help. This commitment was outlined in the [Heart Association's Presidential Advisory on Food Is Medicine](#) as being essential to recognize that food occupies a central place in people's lives and often holds specific meaning integral to self-awareness and cultural identification.

Unlike pharmaceuticals, which are engineered and regulated to be reliably identical from one pill or injection to another, food has unique attributes, especially taste, as well as personal, interpersonal and cultural meaning—a potent challenge to

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standardization. Successful food is medicine interventions must be effective in the treatment, management and prevention of a diet-related disease, and they must consider an individual's personal and cultural relationship with food.

The goal of HCXF's [Lived Experience Patient Advisory Board](#) is to facilitate authentic community engagement by bringing together individuals who have personally navigated food insecurity, diet-related health conditions or chronic disease management challenges. Their first-hand insights guide everything from study design and recruitment materials to evaluation methods and community outreach. The board comprises 20 members who contribute insights, perspectives and feedback to help inform ongoing food is medicine activities.

HCXF's research studies use human-centered design to incorporate the lived experience of patients and practitioners in developing and testing ways of increasing program enrollment and engagement rates across diverse populations. Contributions by lived experience patient advisors have led to crucial adjustments throughout HCXF-funded projects, including enhanced communications with patients, virtual access options, bilingual materials and metrics that extend beyond health measures to include quality of life and meaningful food-related outcomes.

In 2026, the board plans to expand with more diverse representation to include rural and multi-generational households, and individuals managing multiple conditions. The board's work will continue to influence both current pilot studies and future large-scale trials, helping HCXF stay firmly anchored in the communities it serves.

By embedding lived experience into every phase, HCXF is ensuring food is medicine interventions are not only evidence-based but also informed by real-world insights that will result in programs that resonate, engage and truly make an impact.

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## Advancing Health Among Communities with High Socioeconomic Deprivation

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Health Care by Food research grantee, Dr. Lisa Bailey-Davis, speaks with Laurie Norton, MA, MBE, senior research director, Center for Health Incentives and Behavioral Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, in the Food Is Medicine Pavilion at the Association's Scientific Sessions in November. (*American Heart Association*)

Low-income, rural pregnant women are at a [disproportionate risk for adverse pregnancy outcomes](#) as well as future cardiovascular risk. Health Care by Food research grantee, Lisa Bailey-Davis, DEd, RD, understands that the core approaches to investigate implementation and health outcomes depend on community-based research, patient-engagement strategies, professional training, health information technologies and electronic data sharing.

Bailey-Davis, professor of population health sciences and director of the Center for Women's and Children's Research at the Geisinger College of Health Sciences in Danville, Pennsylvania, is the principal investigator of the food is medicine pilot study, *Advancing Health Equity by Integrating Social Clinical Models During Pregnancy*, to evaluate a Clinic WIC integration model against usual prenatal care.

Currently, less than half of eligible women enroll in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. Bailey-Davis' research integrated clinical care and social care to identify the most effective approaches for linking women receiving obstetric care to WIC and/or Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) counseling.

The research team partnered with the Family Health Council of Central Pennsylvania and Maternal and Family Health Services, private, not-for-profit organizations dedicated to improving health, preventing disease and promoting wellness through WIC services.

Significantly more patients enrolled in WIC in the digital referral models versus those in

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models that provided information only. Improvements in adherence to the Mediterranean Eating Plan for Americans improved during pregnancy in all models. Food insecurity during pregnancy significantly decreased in all models except the Clinic-WIC model.

“This research is helping us to understand whether simple strategies that clinicians weave into prenatal care can make it easier for patients to connect with food programs and learn skills to plan and prepare heart healthy meals,” said Bailey-Davis.

Bailey-Davis’ focus on prenatal nutrition exemplifies the food is medicine approach—rooted in clinical research, community partnerships and structural innovation. Her work helps shift health care toward proactive, equitable and nutrition-sensitive care models.

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## Join Health Care by Food at EPI | Lifestyle

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March 17–20, 2026  
Boston, MA  
**#EPIlifestyle26**



Health Care by Food at EPI | Lifestyle – [Register now!](#)  
Friday, March 20th 12:15-1:15PM | Grand Ballroom  
**Conceptual Framework and Key Considerations for Field-  
Based Infrastructure in Food Is Medicine Research**  
Special Lunch Session | Limited Attendance

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Register: Behavioral Science Webinar

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Health Care Food

Upcoming Webinar  
**Leveraging Flexibility  
to Increase Goal  
Persistence**

Feb 3, 2026 | 3:30 – 4:30 pm ET

Speakers  
**Marissa A. Sharif, PhD, MBA**  
*Associate Professor of Marketing,  
the Wharton School,  
University of Pennsylvania*  
*Member of Behavioral Science Task Force,  
Health Care by Food*



Scan to Register

**Behavioral Science Webinar:** Leveraging Flexibility to Increase Goal Persistence

February 3, Tuesday, at 3:30 – 4:30 pm ET | 2:30–3:30 pm CT | 12:30 – 1:30 pm PT

Speaker: Marissa A. Sharif, PhD, MBA, Associate Professor of Marketing, the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Description:

Food is medicine studies and interventions often face challenges with participant engagement and retention. This webinar will discuss interventions that leverage flexibility in order to help people persist towards their goals.

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**Behind HCXF's Research: What 25 Food Is Medicine Studies Reveal About Real-World Challenges and Successes**

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Dr. Mitchell Elkind, the American Heart Association's chief science officer, brain health and stroke, discussed HCXF's focus group insights with Jenn Robinson, senior research and grant administrator and Dr. Dara O'Neil, senior program evaluation analyst, at the Food Is Medicine Pavilion during the Association's Scientific Sessions in November. *(American Heart Association)*

Health Care by Food (HCXF) emphasizes rigorous scientific research to achieve high quality, evidence-based outcomes to support food is medicine interventions within clinical care. To date, the initiative has funded 23 small-scale research projects and two secondary analyses across the U.S. These projects focused on rapid-cycle innovation, implementation science and adaptive trial designs that reflect real-world conditions. The research is designed to generate evidence on feasibility, participant engagement and short-term dietary changes, with the aim of informing larger, comparative effectiveness trials in the future.

To understand how insights from this initial research phase could shape future funding strategies and help build a more robust and scalable FIM evidence base, HCXF's senior program evaluation analyst, Dara O'Neil, PhD, sought to gather concrete, actionable and useful insights from three key stakeholder groups involved in the initiative: (1) HCXF-funded researchers, (2) community-based organizations (CBOs) and (3) food vendors that collaborated in implementing the food is medicine research interventions.

Health Care by Food conducted five virtual focus groups with food is medicine researchers and CBO partners, and interviewed one food vendor in July 2025. Discussions addressed:

- lessons learned
  - evidence gaps
  - opportunities to strengthen study methods
  - implementation barriers
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- motivations for participation
- priorities for future FIM research

Participants viewed food is medicine as very promising but emphasized that the current evidence base is still uneven and often not aligned with the practical questions decision makers need answered to support broader adoption. They also pointed to ongoing measurement and data limitations that make it harder to interpret results across settings and build a clear sustainment case.

Stakeholders also highlighted that feasibility depends heavily on early, well-structured partnerships and real-world operational capacity. Across settings, participants described coordination and logistics as central challenges and emphasized that engagement is driven more by trust and relationships than by technology alone. Looking ahead, they suggested that demonstrating value may require pairing health outcomes with clear, audience-specific communication and stronger coordination across the field.

Key findings were presented at the American Public Health Association's annual meeting in November 2025. This work is helping to strengthen food is medicine research by identifying barriers and highlighting strategies for overcoming challenges to enhance the evidence base and support implementation for future research in support of public health.

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## Food For Thought: Keep Your Brain in MIND

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*(Getty images)*

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Earlier this month, the *New York Times* published a 5-Day Brain Health Challenge that emphasized how diet directly supports cognitive function, highlighting research on the [MIND diet](#) and its link to better brain health.

Although our brain comprises just 2% of average body mass, it demands a 20% share of total body energy. Therefore, it's important to stack daily meals and snacks with nutrient dense foods—such as berries, leafy greens, whole grains, nuts, beans, fish, poultry and olive oil. The MIND diet is associated with improved cognitive function, reduced dementia risk and slower Alzheimer's progression.

"This is one of the most promising nutrition strategies for protecting cognitive function as we age," said Mitchell Elkind, MD, MS, FAHA, the Heart Association's chief science officer for brain health and stroke. "What's especially compelling about the MIND diet is that its benefits don't require perfection—small, sustainable shifts toward leafy greens, berries, whole grains and healthy fats can meaningfully influence long-term brain resilience."

A bit of icing on the cake: people benefit from the MIND diet regardless of whether they start in midlife or late in life. "As we continue to understand the deep connection between cardiovascular and cognitive health, the MIND diet stands out as a practical, evidence-based approach that empowers people to take control of their brain health every day," Elkind said.

Note: The diet used in this study differs from the [American Heart Association's dietary guidance](#) which emphasizes a variety of fruits and vegetables, prioritizes plant-based proteins (with lean meats as an option) and recommends using liquid plant oils instead of saturated fats. The guidance also advises people if they don't drink, don't start, and for those who already drink, to limit alcohol intake (regardless of type).

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## Helping States Develop Successful Medicaid 1115 Waivers

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Delaware Lt. Governor Kyle Evans Gay and Dr. Kevin Volpp, HCXF scientific lead discuss food is medicine at The Council of State Governments national conference in December. (*American Heart Association*)

Health Care by Food held a food is medicine food is medicine learning hub at the Council of State Governments national conference in Chicago in December. Health Care by Food Scientific Lead, Kevin Volpp, MD, PhD, shared a research update and demonstrated how Medicaid 1115 waivers can test food is medicine interventions. Dr. Volpp also discussed what early evidence shows and why rigorous evaluation is key to policy sustainability.

The Council on State Governments is a nonpartisan community of the states, committed to connecting, informing, inspiring and empowering public servants in all three branches of state government to put the best ideas and solutions into practice.

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### Upcoming Events:

[International Stroke Conference 2026 - Professional Heart Daily | American Heart Association](#)

Pre-Cons and Stroke Nursing Symposia: February 3, 2026

Sessions: February 4–6, 2026 | New Orleans, Louisiana

[Epidemiology and Prevention | Lifestyle and Cardiometabolic Health](#)

March 17–20, 2026 | Boston

[Register now!](#)

[FIMCON](#) Food is Medicine Conference

June 1-2, 2026 | Washington, DC

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Publications:

[Medically Tailored Grocery Delivery for Food Pantry Clients with Diabetes - Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior](#)

[Characteristics of the People and Communities Served by GusNIP Produce Prescriptions: United States, 2020–2024 | AJPH | Vol. 115 Issue 12](#)

[Effects of an optimal defaults grocery shopping intervention on household grocery purchases of families with young children - ScienceDirect](#)

[Medically Tailored Meals: A Case for Federal Policy Action](#)

[DASH-Patterned Groceries and Effects on Blood Pressure: The GoFresh Randomized Clinical Trial | Hypertension | JAMA | JAMA Network](#)

Resource:

[ACLM Food as Medicine Learning Center](#)

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