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BUSINESS

Your Next Medical Treatment Could Be a Healthier Diet

Meals to help treat and prevent medical conditions are in development, say food and insurance executives at WSJ's Global Food Forum

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Food and insurance companies are exploring ways to link health coverage to diets, increasingly positioning food as a preventive measure to protect human health and treat disease.

Insurance companies and startups are developing meals tailored to help treat existing medical conditions, industry executives said, while promoting nutritious diets as a way to help ward off diet-related disease and health problems.

“We know that for adults, around 45% of those who die from heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, stroke, that poor nutrition is a major contributing factor,” said Gail Boudreaux, chief executive of insurance provider Elevance Health **ELV 1.62%** ▲, speaking at The Wall Street Journal Global Food Forum. “Healthy food is a real opportunity.”

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Elevance, formerly known as Anthem, includes medically tailored meals and produce prescriptions in health programs, Boudreaux said. Elevance is working with physicians and pharmacists as it evaluates diet's influence on conditions such as inflammation and excessive weight gain.

Diet-related health conditions are a growing challenge for healthcare providers, insurers and the federal government. The number of adults with diabetes tripled over two decades to 537 million, or 11% of the global population, in 2021, according to the International Diabetes Federation. Roughly one-fifth of the children in the U.S. are considered obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, up from less than 5% in the 1970s.

Sandwiches with some processed cheeses and meats—such as roast beef, ham and bacon—rank as the top source of sodium and saturated fat in Americans' diets, making up about one-fifth of daily sodium intake, according to data from a federal survey.

Research is under way that could provide data to support expansion of food-related coverage under Medicare and Medicaid, according to Ashley Tyrner, CEO of FarmboxRX. The company works with healthcare providers to provide produce and other foods tailored toward healthy diets and some medical conditions, including diabetes.

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“If you eat healthier you’re going to be healthier and claims dollars will be less,” said Tyrner, speaking at Journal’s Food Forum event. “But it has been a challenge to get policy to come to that forefront and to that belief.”

Boudreaux said Elevance several years ago provided employees with regular access to what she said was a healthy mix of fruits, vegetables and meat. Healthcare costs declined among employees who participated in the program, she said, with fewer emergency-room visits and a reduced need for inpatient services.

Elevance is screening for nutrition and diet with healthcare providers, via fitness and nutrition trackers that people can opt into, Boudreaux said. The company doesn’t plan to consider diet in the same way that it does smoking, she said.

Federal lawmakers are debating the government’s role in directing consumers’ eating habits. Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) has introduced legislation aimed at prohibiting food-assistance funds from being used to purchase items such as ice cream, cookies and soda. A House Republican spending bill, approved last week, would establish a pilot program in which some states would bar certain foods and beverages from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Critics, including Democrats and some Republicans, have said the federal government shouldn’t try to regulate citizens’ diets.

Other lawmakers have suggested structuring incentives that reward healthier food purchasing. Lawmakers are considering changes to the SNAP program as they prepare to shape the next five-year farm bill.

The food-as-medicine concept is drawing investment from venture-capital firms, as startups craft businesses based around designing meals aimed at fighting illnesses and addressing medical conditions. Last year, a coalition of investment firms pledged \$2.5 billion over three years to back efforts to improve access to nutritious food.