

Every day, doctors write prescriptions for medications that will treat various ailments in their patients. Those prescriptions, though, come once the patient is already sick. In an effort to stop disease before it starts, some researchers are pushing for policies and programs that would let doctors prescribe healthy foods and insurers to cover them—actively helping patients shift to a health-promoting diet.

These types of programs work: Subsidizing fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods under Medicare and Medicaid could prevent millions of cases, as well as deaths from cardiovascular disease, according to a new model. It would prevent hundreds of thousands of diabetes cases, as well, and save billions of dollars in healthcare costs.

“The power of food as medicine is increasingly clear,” says study author Dariush Mozaffarian, dean of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. And the idea of treating food as a key element of healthcare is catching on across the healthcare industry, says Rita Nguyen, assistant Health Officer in the San Francisco Department of Public Health. “People are recognizing the common sense of it all,” she says. “We spend so much on healthcare, and our outcomes are abysmal. We don’t invest in prevention.”

Food as medicine doesn’t mean that individual foods can be used to treat individual conditions or diseases, but that a healthy diet can help manage disease, Nguyen notes—the leading risk factor for cardiovascular disease, for example, is poor diet. “With food insecurity, treating someone by giving them food can improve health. For those who are food secure, anyone given a good diet will have improved health management,” she says.