

YOUR HEALTH

Richmond free clinic hopes to use food to fight chronic disease



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As processed foods dominate most Americans' plates — and diabetes, heart disease and obesity rates soar — a Richmond free clinic is starting to treat food as medicine.

Health Brigade, formerly Fan Free Clinic, is launching its Food Farmacy on June 1, a program designed to provide patients with fresh produce, along with classes on cooking and nutrition, in an effort to improve their health.

"We've always had a food pantry," said Dr. Wendy Klein, Health Brigade's medical director. "However, in providing food, we did not pay much attention to nutrient content and caloric content. We all worked on the assumption that some food is better than no food. But there is a growing national awareness that food matters and nutrition matters in health."

Nearly 50 percent of Health Brigade's patients struggle with diabetes and hypertension. According to the American Diabetes Association, one in three Americans

has high blood pressure, and 9.3 percent of the entire population had diabetes in 2012.

Fighting and preventing chronic disease through nutrition is rising in importance. The American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association have dietary guidelines on their websites, advising of the best ways to prevent heart disease or cancer through nutrition.

"We really want to move away from the calorie-rich, nutrient-poor food, which we all know will worsen diabetes over time," Klein said. "And (patients are) going to be bringing this food home to their families, and so it is our hope we're impacting more people."

The Food Farmacy will start with 15 patients who will receive fresh produce for 12 weeks, along with cooking and nutrition classes and one-on-one health coaching.

"You can't just give a person a bag of kale and expect them to know what to do with it," Klein said.

During the 12 weeks, Klein said Health Brigade will measure a blood marker for diabetes control, as well as the participants' body mass index and blood pressure to mark any changes.

Shalom Farms, an area organization focused on ending food insecurity,

will provide 300 servings of produce per week for the program. The patients will learn how to cook the produce, along with lean meats and grains to help them move away from processed foods.

Access is an issue for many Health Brigade patients, Klein pointed out. The free clinic serves patients without health insurance who are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Numerous studies have found that low-income patients deal with higher instances of obesity and cardiovascular disease, likely because they have a harder time accessing the foods that can slow or reverse disease. A 2011 study by the University of California, Davis found that people with a lower socioeconomic status are more likely to develop heart disease.

Health Brigade received a \$48,000 grant from the SUPERVALU Foundation to launch the program, and the free clinic was able to renovate its demonstration kitchen and food pantry.

Klein said the free clinic will also be holding focused healthy food drives, in which it asks specifically for certain foods to be donated.

"Diabetes, obesity and hypertension are so prevalent and, if we can change behaviors so that people benefit from healthier foods, then that trickles down to the families who usually have the same risk factors," Klein said. "The impact can be huge."

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