

Background

Food insecurity and other unmet social determinants of health (SDOH) can contribute to adverse outcomes for mothers and newborns. Food is Medicine (FIM) approaches are promising for improving healthy eating and nutrition but have not been explored fully among rural pregnant people.

Objective

To partner with four community organizations to implement five tailored food and nutrition support options for perinatal patients at a rural northern New England hospital.

Methods

Pregnant patients identified as food insecure via the Hunger Vital Sign screening were referred to a community health worker, provided with pregnancy-specific nutrition education, and connected to one or more food supports. Onsite options, including shelf-stable food bags, frozen nutritionally tailored meals (NTMs), farm shares, and basic cooking equipment, offered immediate support. Home-delivered NTMs were available for those with significant functional challenges, including housing and transportation barriers. Healthy food prescriptions picked up offsite were provided as a transition from intensive to more sustainable support.

Results

In 2023, 252 (8.3%) perinatal patients screened positive for food insecurity. Between Jul 2022 - May 2024, we provided approximately 4,000 NTMs, food prescriptions, farm shares, and food bags to approximately 300 patients. Interviewed patients (n=19) found these programs feasible and acceptable; one said, "The resource we got through our care helped us through a hard time while our baby was in the [intensive care nursery] and we had two toddlers at home." Patient survey data (n=31) indicated high satisfaction with all food supports (especially farm shares and NTMs), and patients reported eating more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and healthy proteins.

Conclusion

Strengths of our FIM programs for perinatal patients include flexibility in workflows and integration with SDOH screening, food support in tandem with nutrition education, reliance on local assets, and the ability to tailor options for a range of social and nutritional needs.