



The Impact of Nutrition Education in Pantry Settings

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DESCRIPTION

Food pantries are an important source of food assistance for low-income and food-insecure households. However, the availability and quality of food options at food pantries may not always meet the nutritional needs and preferences of the clients. Moreover, many food pantry clients may lack the knowledge and skills to make healthy food choices, plan menus, budget, shop, cook, and store food safely. Therefore, providing nutrition education at food pantries can be a valuable strategy to improve the dietary intake and health outcomes of this population. Nutrition education is defined as “any combination of educational strategies, accompanied by environmental supports, designed to facilitate voluntary adoption of food choices and other food- and nutrition-related behaviors conducive to health and well-being”. Nutrition education can help food pantry clients learn about the benefits of eating a balanced diet, the recommended servings of different food groups, the nutritional value of various foods, and the ways to prepare and consume them. Nutrition education can also empower food pantry clients to make informed decisions about the food they receive from the pantry and how to supplement it with other sources of food assistance or low-cost foods.

There are different approaches and methods to deliver nutrition education at food pantries. One common approach is to offer classes or workshops that cover topics such as nutrition basics, food labels, portion sizes, dietary guidelines, Plate, food safety, food budgeting, menu planning, shopping tips, cooking skills, and recipes. These classes can be led by trained nutrition educators, such as Extension agents or staff from the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed). The classes can be offered on a regular basis or as a series of sessions that build on each other. The classes can also be customized to its specific needs and interests of the clients, such as cultural preferences, health conditions, or dietary restrictions. Another approach is to provide nutrition education materials or activities at the food pantry that clients can access on their own time and pace. These materials or activities can include flyers,

brochures, posters, newsletters, videos, podcasts, websites, apps, games, quizzes, or surveys that contain information or tips on nutrition and healthy eating. These materials or activities can be displayed or distributed at the pantry entrance, exit, waiting area, or distribution area. They can also be integrated with the food items or packages that clients receive from the pantry. For example, some pantries attach nutrition labels or recipes to the foods they distribute or include them in the bags or boxes they give to the clients.

A third approach is to create a supportive environment at the food pantry that encourages and facilitates healthy eating behaviors among the clients. This can be done by improving the availability and accessibility of nutritious foods at the pantry, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, lean meats, beans, nuts, seeds, and low-sodium canned goods. This can also be done by enhancing the appearance and appeal of these foods through attractive displays, signs, labels, stickers, or incentives. Additionally, this can be done by involving the clients in the selection and distribution of foods at the pantry through surveys, feedback forms, taste tests, cooking demonstrations, or gardening projects. The benefits of nutrition education at food pantries are manifold. Research has shown that nutrition education at food pantries can improve the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, self-efficacy, and intentions of clients regarding nutrition and healthy eating. It can also increase their consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and other healthy foods. Furthermore, it can reduce their intake of fats, sodium, sugar, and processed foods. Additionally, it can enhance their skills in budgeting, menu planning, food selection, cooking, and food preparation.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it can help them prevent or manage chronic diseases such as obesity, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and diabetes. Nutrition education at food pantries is a significant practice that can address the nutritional needs and challenges of low-income and food-insecure populations. However, there are also some barriers and limitations to implementing nutrition education at

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food pantries. Some of these barriers include lack of space, funding, personnel, equipment, transportation, storage, or refrigeration at the pantry. Some others include lack of interest, motivation, time, or literacy among the clients. Therefore,

collaborative efforts among community partners and nutrition experts are necessary to overcome these barriers and provide effective and sustainable nutrition education programs at food pantries.