Small Intervention, Big Impact:

Health Care Cost Reductions Related to Medically Tailored Nutrition

Food is a critical aspect of health care for people living with illnesses like congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes. Unfortunately, lack of disease-specific nutrition knowledge, low energy, and financial constraints due to hospital bills, co-pays, emergency department visits, and medications can make eating right especially challenging for people managing illness. Many end up being hospitalized due to malnutrition or other nutrition-related complications.

What happens when people living with chronic illness have access to home-delivered, medically tailored meals? Research shows this approach has the potential to reduce total health care costs for patients, insurance companies, and communities alike.

What impacts health the most?

When it comes to health, the quality of your health care matters. But research shows that medical care accounts for only a small fraction of overall health. Other factors, like where you live and what you eat, can have far greater impact.

Medical care
(access and quality)

Health behaviors
(diet, tobacco use, etc.)

Social & economic factors
(education, employment, etc.)

Physical environment
(transportation, housing, etc.)

Medically tailored meals are meals approved by a registered dietitian nutritionist that use evidence-based guidelines to ensure positive health outcomes.

At Project Angel Heart, we offer a variety of diets, including: standard healthy diet, renal-friendly, heart-healthy, vegetarian, allergy-friendly, and naked/bland. When you add in texture modifications and additional accommodations for allergies, side effects, and religious beliefs, we create an average of 18-20 different meal variations each day to make sure every client receives food that meets their unique needs.

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**Impact of medically tailored, home-delivered meals on health care costs**

Using medical claims data from the Colorado All Payer Claims Database, we examined the health care costs of Project Angel Heart clients before, during, and after they received meal deliveries. Here’s what we learned:

**Medically tailored meals lead to a decrease in hospital readmissions**

- **All Payers / All Diagnoses**
  - Before meal deliveries: $344
  - During meal deliveries: $300
  - 13% Decrease

When Project Angel Heart clients received meals, they saw a 13% reduction in hospital readmissions. The average cost of a hospital readmission is $13,430.

**Total medical costs for people with CHF, COPD, and diabetes decreased**

- **Total Medical Costs**
  - Before meal deliveries: $2836
  - During meal deliveries: $2101
  - 24% Average Reduction

When clients living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), congestive heart failure (CHF), and diabetes received meal deliveries, their total monthly medical costs went down an average of 24 percent.

**Clients spent less on hospital stays while receiving meals**

- **Inpatient Costs**
  - Before meal deliveries: $1005
  - During meal deliveries: $621
  - Cost Reduction Up To $555

Clients with CHF, COPD, end-stage renal disease (ESRD), and diabetes spent from $111/month to $555/month less on inpatient (hospital) medical expenses than they did prior to receiving meals.

**What’s next for medically tailored meals?**

Based on what we’ve learned, we recommend:

- **Integrate medically tailored, home-delivered meals into health care delivery and payment models**

Research shows that the right food and nutrition—especially medically tailored meals—lead to improved health outcomes for people with chronic illness, so they should be considered a standard part of treatment by health care providers and insurance providers alike.

- **Continue to study how medically tailored meals impact the health outcomes and costs of chronically ill individuals**

There’s still a lot to learn about how medically tailored meals impact health outcomes and health care costs. Additional research is needed to build upon what we already know and to help providers of medically tailored meals continue demonstrating a strong return on investment when meals are integrated into care.

**Sources:**