



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



ASCEND

FOR BETTER HEALTH

Agricultural **S**cience **C**enter of **E**xcellence for
Nutrition and **D**iet (ASCEND) for Better Health

**BUILDING HEALTHIER
COMMUNITIES TOGETHER**

A HIGH-LEVEL SUMMARY REPORT

Diet-related chronic diseases are prevalent among Americans and pose a major public health problem.¹ Today, **6 in 10** people have at least one chronic disease and **4 in 10** people have two or more chronic diseases.² While these diseases significantly reduce quality and quantity of life, the good news is that they are largely preventable through proper nutrition and a healthy lifestyle.

USDA launched the **ASCEND for Better Health** initiative to address challenges around food and nutrition security, health equity, and the prevalence of diet-related chronic diseases, especially in underserved communities.

To gain insight to food-related challenges and opportunities across diverse communities, USDA hosted engagements in partnership with **Southern University and A&M College**, **Texas A&M International University** and **Texas A&M Institute for Advancing Health Through Agriculture**, **United Tribes Technical College**, and **4-H**. These events fostered dialogue and understanding of the food, nutrition, and health challenges and opportunities facing African American, Hispanic American, Native American, and youth communities.

In total, the events were attended by **more than 450** community members who shared feedback on a variety of questions.





This report highlights the high-level emergent themes that were common across all communities, as well as the more unique insights that were surfaced by individual communities (**African American**, **Hispanic American**, **Native American**, or **Youth**), which are listed below the respective common theme description.

We encourage the use of this information to develop future research, education, Extension, and program efforts that aim to increase food and nutrition security, health equity, and well-being of all Americans in ways that recognize and leverage the unique aspects of both individuals and communities.

CHALLENGES TO HEALTHY EATING

INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS ACROSS COMMUNITIES



LIFESTYLE

Lack of time and difficulty changing habits and personal preferences.



KNOWLEDGE

Lack of knowledge on relationships of food and health, nutrition, and cooking.



INITIATIVE

Lack of motivation, discipline, or willpower.



HEALTH

Lack of physical activity or pre-existing mental or physical health challenges.





CHALLENGES TO HEALTHY EATING

ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS



COST

Healthy foods and lifestyle are perceived as more expensive.

Native American – Applying for federal government nutrition assistance can be difficult and programs may allow for selection of options that are not as healthy as others.



ACCESSIBILITY/AVAILABILITY

Long distance to stores; lack of transportation; increased dependence on local food options; and lack of resources to prepare healthy meals.

African American – Lack of infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks, streetlights, safety) can make it difficult to be physically active.

Native American – Living in remote locations has added risks; winter months make travel and exercise more challenging; hunting and fishing have been impacted by pollution and restrictions around licensing; store closures and reduction in food sources accelerated by pandemic.

Youth – Healthy food options aren't always available at home or school; dependent on others.



SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Family, friends, and other social pressures; maintaining cultural food traditions.

Hispanic American – Traditional foods can be rich in fat and carbs.

Native American – Traditional food knowledge and recipes have been lost as a result of colonization, with greater dependence on foods that may be less healthy; many elders, who held significant traditional knowledge passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING HEALTH

THROUGH NUTRITION & LIFESTYLE



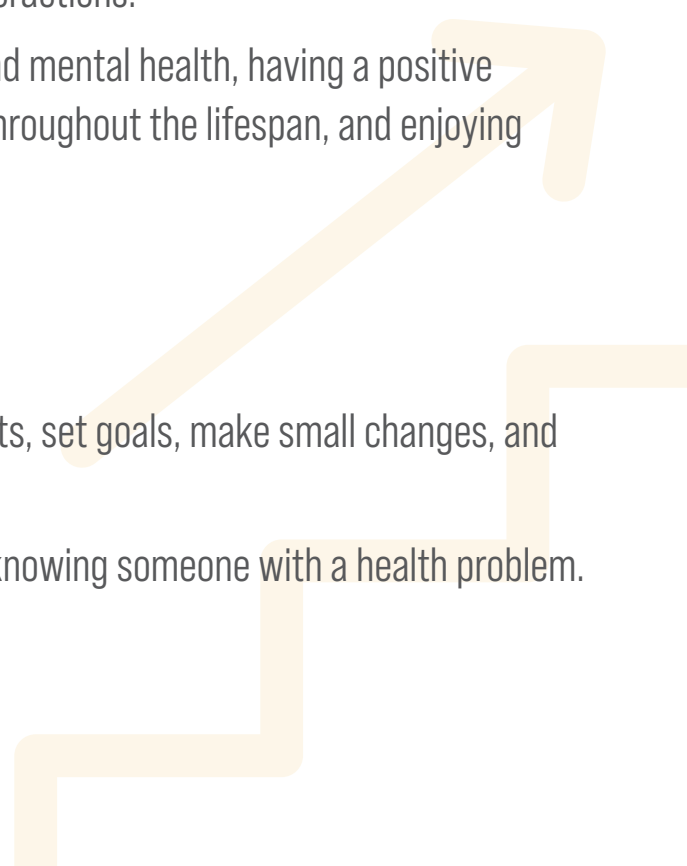
PERSONAL WELLNESS

- **Physical activity** – Access to resources that enable physical activity year-round.
- **Dietary changes** – Education and training on relationships between food and health, how to cook, how to read food labels, and recipes and skills to prepare culturally relevant healthy meals.
- **Healthy habits** – Healthy eating is synergistic with other healthy habits such as physical activity, rest, and healthy social interactions.
- **Quality of life** – Improvements in physical and mental health, having a positive impact on self and others, staying healthy throughout the lifespan, and enjoying more time with children and grandchildren.



MOTIVATION TO CHANGE LIFESTYLE

- **Discipline** – Staying committed to good habits, set goals, make small changes, and self-care.
- **Fear** – Receiving a poor health diagnosis or knowing someone with a health problem.





OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING HEALTH

THROUGH NUTRITION & LIFESTYLE



SOCIAL FACTORS

Support system – Family, friends, and community.

Social impact – Break generational cycles; have or be a role model.

Social environment and cultural influence

African American – Get community buy-in, such as a grass roots initiative focused on developing healthy food resources acceptable to and supported by the community.

Hispanic American – Leverage the strong influence of families; commit to healthy eating and living; develop healthy ways of preparing traditional foods.

Native American – Culture and traditions offer many benefits including eating healthy traditional meals, physical activities such as harvesting, foraging, food preparation and preservation, dancing at powwows, and spirituality. Need to revive and pass on traditional knowledge of gardening, hunting, and fishing.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING HEALTH

THROUGH NUTRITION & LIFESTYLE



ACCESSIBILITY/AVAILABILITY

Increase access to healthier food options or grow your own food.

- **Native American** – Food is medicine; access to certain foods is important.
- **Youth** – Increase access to healthy foods that taste good and are convenient.



FINANCES

Make healthy foods more affordable or improve the economic environment to enable consideration of healthier options.

- **Native American** – Financial assistance programs, access to adequate health care, and health insurance are also important.

CONNECT

To learn more about the ASCEND for Better Health initiative, please visit:



bit.ly/usda-ascend

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