

# Experience of Food FARMacia and COVID-19-Related Food Access in Washington Heights

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This exploratory research aims to examine the experience of participating in Food FARMacia both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well the impact of the pandemic on food access for individuals with pre-existing food insecurity.

## BACKGROUND

Food insecurity, the lack of consistent access to healthy food, is a major barrier to achieving health equity. Children experiencing food insecurity encounter deleterious health effects, likely including an increased risk for childhood overweight or obesity.<sup>1,2</sup> In May 2019, NewYork-Presbyterian, CHALK, and WSCAH created a clinic-based intervention for food insecurity called Food FARMacia. Food FARMacia provides families with free produce and other healthy foods. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of families facing food insecurity in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> In order to both serve more families and minimize risk of COVID-19 exposure, Food FARMacia has made several programmatic changes in the last several months.

## OBJECTIVES

This qualitative, hypothesis-generating research aims to explore:

1. Perceptions, facilitators, and barriers related to implementation of Food FARMacia to address food insecurity both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Impact of the pandemic on social determinants of health and attitudes towards programming to address gaps in food access.

## METHODS

- Developed and pilot-tested semi-structured interview guide
- Performed in-depth interviews in English or Spanish during remote research visits in June – July 2020

Participants: 9 caregivers of pediatric patients at NYP Ambulatory Care Network who screened positive for food insecurity in May 2019 and have participated in Food FARMacia since. All participants identified as female. Ages ranged from 22 to 42 years (mean = 30.1). Eight participants identified as Hispanic/Latino. Participants had between 1 and 4 children. Five were married.

- Content analysis of transcribed/translated interviews using immersion-crystallization techniques
- Developed codebook and coded transcripts using Nvivo Release 1.2
- Student researchers analyzed and discussed emerging themes, as future interviews and further analysis will be conducted at a later date
- Institutional Review Board of CUIMC approved all study protocols

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide had three domains, listed below. Each domain had multiple subdomains with several corresponding interview questions. A sample of subdomains and interview questions are displayed below.

Domain	Sample Subdomain
	<i>Sample Interview Questions for Subdomain</i>
General perceptions of Food FARMacia, before COVID-19	Experience of participating in Food FARMacia program, pre-COVID-19  <i>Tell me what your visits were like to the Food FARMacia truck last year. Tell me about how your family used the food from the truck.</i>
General perceptions of Food FARMacia, after onset of COVID-19 pandemic	Opinion about changes to Food FARMacia since COVID-19  <i>How do you feel about being given a box instead of choosing items yourself? What would you change about the new program?</i>
Food insecurity since onset of COVID-19 pandemic	Perceived impact of COVID-19 on food access in community  <i>What impact has the coronavirus outbreak had on food access for people in your community? Would you say that eating healthy food has become more or less important for your family during the coronavirus outbreak? Why?</i>

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As data collection is not complete, preliminary results are those of the two student researchers only and not of the larger research team. A sample of initial impressions are below.

Subdomain	Theme
	<i>Illustrative Quote</i>
Experience of participating in Food FARMacia program	When asked, every participant said that they usually used all of the Food FARMacia food. Some mentioned that they would give unused food to neighbors or family members, or not take items they did not like.  <i>Because I don't like to throw food. Throw away food, no. Then next time, I think when I went to the truck, I asked the lady, "This thing, I don't use it. I can put it in the truck?" She said, "yes". I leave it.</i>
Perceived benefits of attending Food FARMacia	Several participants described how Food FARMacia exposed their family to new foods and new ways of cooking healthy foods. Some participants spoke about how this exposure helped their children get excited about, and eat more, fruits and vegetables.  <i>I feel like I've expanded of the things that I've eaten. Before, I was always eating certain things, but now that—I'm eatin' to get more vegetables, I'm eatin' to make way more meals. It makes my boys open up their minds, too, to wanting to try different things, so it's really good. It's a great experience.</i>
Perceived impact of COVID-19 on food access	When asked about whether healthy eating has become more, less or equally important due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all six Spanish-speaking participants said it is now more important.  <i>I think more, given the circumstances. Since you have to be confined, you have to eat healthy to avoid getting sick in the future, because basically all you do is sit down, eat, or go to bed.</i>

## DISCUSSION

Ultimately, we hope that results inform programmatic changes in Food FARMacia to help serve its participants facing food insecurity. We also hope that results create a richer understanding of possible solutions for food access needs in Washington Heights and the South Bronx during COVID-19 and beyond.

## REFERENCES

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