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Nutrition Funding

As a member of the American Society of Nutrition, I get regular updates on a variety of nutritional topics. In the latest email, they reported on legislative initiatives; that always makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up a little. More funding is proposed for nutrition research, and believe me, we need it—it was that type of funding provided by the National Institutes of Health that resulted in identifying the sub-clinical vitamin-D deficiency that has resulted in a review of the Recommended Dietary Allowance. Neck hair back to normal.

There were two other programs that were to receive increased funding. One was the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program to boost nutrition, transportation, and other supportive services for elderly Americans. This is where part of the funding comes from for Meals On Wheels and similar programs; an increase will mean more healthy meals for more people.

The other program to get an increase was Head Start, a program for children that provides, among other things, nutritional services for low-income children. Children and their parents are taught how to eat healthier. That's a tremendous benefit in light of the increasing obesity problem for children in this country. In some cases, the children may also qualify for the National School Breakfast programs provided by the United States Department of Agriculture—they can get a healthy start to their day and learn firsthand what they should eat. The earlier that happens, the fewer problems they'll have. Let me tell you why I think these programs are good ideas, sensible investments, and wise policy.

Better Nutrition—Better Immune Function

Nutritional deficiencies in the young and the old affect their immune health; declining immune health means more disease. But eating at least one healthy meal per day, whether for the young or the elderly, will have a clear direct effect: it will help improve the immune system of the participants. The benefits to the people involved are obvious, but there are also clear benefits to society. Healthcare costs are high during the last two years of life; better immune systems may reduce that cost for the elderly.

At the other end of the scale, children have an entire lifetime of potential healthcare costs; better immune systems mean less disease and thus reduced healthcare costs. This is one case where a little prevention just might make a whole lot of difference in controlling healthcare cost in the future. The other benefit to children is that when they're better fed before school, they learn better. Who knows the benefit to our society if every child learns more and completes school?

The Bottom Line

None of us want to pay more taxes, and it would be nice if these types of program weren't necessary. You'll hear stories of these programs being abused—yes, there are human beings involved, aren't there? That aside, this is a case where we can pay now or we can pay later. But just like our personal health, we will pay the price either way. The cost of prevention is always less than the cost of treatment.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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