



# Policy Trends Shaping Healthy Food and Chronic Disease in 2026



## Legislative Prospectus Series: 2026 Public Health Spotlight

### Introduction

A growing focus on links between nutrition and public health outcomes is driving legislative efforts across the country, with states actively responding to rising rates and the cost of [chronic disease](#). As state legislatures consider ways to combat chronic diseases, they are also implementing policies aimed at addressing the food environment by introducing and enacting bills that [regulate ultra-processed foods \(UPFs\)](#), adjust SNAP benefits, and improve access to healthy food.

### Legislative Trends

#### Regulating Food Ingredients and Ultra-Processed Foods

While efforts to define and regulate UPFs are still in development at the federal level, [several states](#) have decided to move forward with legislation targeting the use of specific artificial dyes and chemical preservatives in food products. West Virginia enacted [HB 2354](#), prohibiting the sale or manufacturing of any food containing a list of specified dyes and certain preservatives. Similarly, Vermont is considering [HB 260](#), and New York is considering companion bills [SB 1239/A1556](#). These bills aim to ban the manufacture, sale, or distribution of food containing a core group of chemicals (e.g., potassium bromate, propylparaben, and Red 3).

Meanwhile, North Carolina introduced [HB 440](#), which would prohibit additional color additives and ban the sale of food products containing nine specific dyes and chemicals. Pennsylvania introduced [HB 1134](#), which focused on warning labels and would require foods with dyes Blue 1, Blue 2, Green 3, Red 40, Yellow 5, or Yellow 6 to include a label that states, “This product contains synthetic colors, which may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children.”

California enacted [AB 1264](#), which not only defines “ultra-processed food” but also requires the Department of Public Health to identify and phase out a subcategory of “particularly harmful” UPFs from public schools by 2035.

#### Restricting Ingredients in School Meals

While previous years have focused on [access to school meals](#), a growing wave of recent state legislation aims to eliminate UPFs, synthetic dyes, and chemical preservatives from children’s diets. Several states have enacted or advanced bans on specific chemical additives in school meals: Utah’s [HB 402](#) and Virginia’s [HB 1910](#) prohibit schools from offering food containing common food dyes (Blue 1, Blue 2, Green 3, Red 3, Red 40, Yellow 5, and Yellow 6) or certain preservatives like potassium bromate and propylparaben. Similarly, Texas enacted [SB 314](#) prohibiting specific additives in free or reduced-price school meals and [SB 25](#), which mandates warning labels and expands state nutrition curriculum. In addition, other jurisdictions have introduced but not passed numerous bills proposing similar restrictions including South Carolina’s [HB 4339](#), which would prohibit certain additives in school meals.

#### Modifying SNAP

[SNAP](#) is the nation’s largest federal food assistance program, providing benefits to low-income households. While the program is federally funded and administered by [USDA](#) through its Food and Nutrition Service, individual state agencies operate and manage eligibility and distribution. Since SNAP is governed by federal law, states must obtain a [USDA waiver](#) to implement changes that deviate from the federal rules.

Several states are exploring waivers to limit the use of SNAP funds for purchasing candy and sweetened beverages or soft drinks, with Arkansas ([SB 217](#)), Idaho ([HB 109](#)), and Texas ([SB 379](#)) having passed legislation. Arkansas’s new law requires the Department of Human Services to request a waiver to exclude candy and soft drinks, and reapply annually if denied. This dual ban was also the subject of bills introduced in Wyoming ([HB 323](#)) and South Carolina ([HB 4061](#)). Indiana ([HB 1486](#)) considered broader restrictions on “accessory foods,” aiming to prohibit the use of SNAP benefits for items like chips, energy drinks, sweetened beverages, soft drinks, and prepared desserts while New Jersey ([AB 5697/SB 4348](#)) introduced a narrower set of proposed restrictions, focused on soft drinks (including soda and sugary/sweetened beverages).

## Expanding Detection and Coverage for Chronic Diseases

In response to [high chronic disease rates](#) — including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and respiratory illnesses — states are enacting and proposing legislation focused on treatment coverage, awareness, and prevention. Several states are directly addressing obesity and pre-diabetes by mandating insurance coverage. Colorado ([SB 25-048](#)) enacted legislation requiring large group health plans to cover treatment for obesity and pre-diabetes, including medical nutrition therapy and metabolic/bariatric surgery. In Nevada, [AB 555](#) caps patient cost-sharing for a 30-day supply of insulin for people with state-regulated commercial health plans.

To aid early detection of diabetes, New Hampshire ([SB 102](#)), Louisiana ([SB 26](#)), and Florida ([SB 958](#)) enacted new laws requiring the creation of informational materials on Type 1 diabetes risk factors, warning signs, and screening available to students and parents. To reduce financial barriers to necessary cancer screenings, several states have enacted bills to mandate insurance coverage and/or lower the cost of diagnostic breast exams and supplemental testing. Virginia ([HB 1828](#)), Florida ([SB 158](#)), and Oklahoma ([HB 1389](#)) have enacted bills to limit or lower the cost of such breast imaging. Meanwhile, Colorado enacted [HB 25-296](#), clarifying that health insurers cover medically necessary diagnostic and supplemental breast imaging that goes beyond routine screening.



## Looking Ahead

ASTHO expects state and territories to continue advancing legislative proposals that focus on the prevention of chronic diseases and access to healthy foods in 2026. Future legislative action may include:

- Establishing policies to address food insecurity and promote access to nutritional foods by targeting food deserts.
- Exploring policy to discourage the consumption of high-sugar drinks.
- Developing and adopting standards for healthy food procurement policies for state agencies and public institutions to increase the demand for nutritious products.
- Continuing to enact insurance coverage mandates for comprehensive chronic disease screenings and treatment.



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