Food stamps not enough for healthy diet

By Eli Saslow, Washington Post

McALLEN, Texas – They were already running late for a doctor's appointment, but first the Salas family hurried into their kitchen for another breakfast paid for by the federal government. The 4-year-old grabbed a bag of cheddar-flavored potato chips and a granola bar. The 9-year-old filled a bowl with sugary cereal and then gulped down chocolate milk. Their mother, Blanca, arrived at the refrigerator and reached into the drawer where she stored the insulin needed to treat her diabetes. She filled a needle with fluid and injected it into her stomach with a practiced jab.

"Let's go," she told the children, rushing them out of the kitchen and into the car. "We can stop for snacks on our way home."

The family checkup had been scheduled at the insistence of a school nurse, who wanted the Salas family to address two concerns: They were suffering from both a shortage of nutritious food and a diet of excess – paradoxical problems that have become increasingly interconnected in the United States, and especially in South Texas.

For almost a decade, Blanca had supported her five children by stretching $430 in monthly food stamp benefits, adding lard to thicken her refried beans and buying instant soup by the case at a nearby dollar store. She shopped for "quantity over quality," she said, aiming to fill a grocery cart for $100 or less.

But the cheap foods she could afford on the standard government allotment of about $1.50 per meal also tended to be among the least nutritious – heavy in preservatives, fats,

salt and refined sugar. Now Clarissa, her 13-year-old daughter, had a darkening ring around her neck that suggested early-onset diabetes from too much sugar. Now Antonio, 9, was sharing dosages of his mother’s cholesterol medication. Now Blanca herself was too sick to work, receiving disability payments at age 40 and testing her blood-sugar level twice each day to guard against the stroke doctors warned was forthcoming as a result of her diet.

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