Background The World Health Organization recommends all countries to facilitate healthy eating through primary care settings; recognised as one of the 'best buys' for improving the health of societies. However, health professionals face barriers to discussing nutrition and weight management in consultations, warranting alternative models of support to be explored. Providing food directly to patients in primary care is an underexplored yet promising approach to healthy eating and weight management.

Objectives This systematic review aimed to determine whether providing food to patients in primary care facilitates weight loss and improves other health outcomes.

Method A systematic literature review was conducted using four electronic databases. Interventions that directly and exclusively provided foodstuffs and/or supplements to patients in primary care settings were included. Interventions that involved other components such as exercise classes or education sessions were excluded.

Results Four studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria; two from the United Kingdom, one from the USA and one from Israel. Two studies utilised meal replacement products but differed in length and intensity of the intervention, another study provided green tea and vitamin E supplementation to patients and the final study incorporated a voucher for use at a farmers’ market hosted at a primary care clinic. Three of the four studies observed some weight loss among participants and all studies observed at least one other improvement such as reduced waist circumference, blood pressure or glycosylated haemoglobin (HbA1c). However, the methodological quality of the studies ranged from weak to moderate, reducing confidence in results.

Discussion/Conclusion A small but promising body of literature exists on providing food directly to patients in primary care. There is clear opportunity for further research on the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of directly providing food to patients to support weight loss, improve health outcomes and ultimately inform policy initiatives for primary care.