

Talking to your patients about food insecurity

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”



How food insecurity impacts patient health

The combination of an unhealthy diet and food insecurity leads to:

- Two-thirds of these individuals having to choose between medication and food¹
- Higher rates of ED visits, hospital readmissions and urgent care visits²
- More hospitalizations and longer inpatient stays²
- Higher levels of chronic disease³
 - Diabetes
 - Hypertension
 - Coronary heart disease
 - Chronic kidney disease
- Poor diabetes self-management⁴
- Higher probability of mental health issues such as depression⁵

Screening your patients for food insecurity

If you aren't already, you or your staff can use the Hunger Vital Sign™ two-item screener question survey below to quickly screen for the food needs of your patients and their households.⁶

1. “Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.” Was that **often true**, **sometimes true** or **never true** for you/your household?
2. “Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more.” Was that **often true**, **sometimes true** or **never true** for you/your household?

A response of **sometimes true** or **often true** to either or both questions should trigger a referral for food security support.

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Steps you can take if your patient screens positive for food insecurity

1. Discuss with your patient the importance of good nutrition as it relates to their health
2. Work with local community partners to identify available and convenient programs and resources for patients
3. Make referrals to the local food bank and other community resources for immediate assistance and ongoing support

Resources can be located using Feeding America's Find Your Local Food Bank tool at www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank.

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“Social determinants impact patient health more than we can imagine. I had a diabetic patient whose sugar levels were under control at times, then uncontrolled at the next visit. **After months of assessing, I learned that she was managing her sugars mid-month because that’s when she got paid and could afford to buy healthy food. Once her money ran out, she relied on food pantries and neighbors, and was eating more processed foods rather than fresh, healthy options.** So her sugars would go off the chart by the end of the month.”

Sarah Moyer, M.D. | Director
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Sources

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⁴Seligman, H., Jacobs, E., Lopez, A., Tschann, J., Fernandez, A. 2012. Food insecurity and glycemic control among low-income patients with Type 2 diabetes. *Diabetes Care* 35 (2): 233-8.

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⁶Hager, E., Quigg, A., Black, M., Coleman, S., et al. 2010. Development and validity of a 2-item screen to identify families at risk for food insecurity. *Pediatrics*, 126(1), e26-e32.