

# Talking to your patients about food insecurity

We all know the quality of food we eat affects our health. But for many Americans, an unhealthy diet is a common reality, a consequence of food insecurity. The good news—you and your care team are able to help.

## FOOD INSECURITY VS. HUNGER

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. In comparison, hunger is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.

When people are hungry because their food supply is insecure, their health is in danger. And this situation is widespread.



In America, there are **over 37 million people** living in food insecure households. That means **1 in 9 Americans** are food insecure.<sup>1</sup>

## REGULAR ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD MATTERS

Food insecurity has direct and indirect impacts on both physical and mental well-being for people of all ages. It's also associated with some of the nation's most common and costly health problems and behaviors. Food insecurity can contribute to poor nutrition, which is linked to chronic diseases. Diets with too much saturated or trans-fat and not enough fruits and vegetables have been associated with cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and some types of cancer.<sup>2</sup>



## SCREENING YOUR PATIENTS FOR FOOD INSECURITY

During annual wellness exams or regular appointments with patients, use the Hunger Vital Sign two-item survey below to screen them for food insecurity:

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?

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

## WHEN PATIENTS SCREEN POSITIVE FOR FOOD INSECURITY, YOU CAN HELP

1. Discuss the importance of good nutrition as it relates to their health.
2. If they agree to accept help, make referrals to the local food bank and other community or national resources for immediate assistance and ongoing support.
3. Consider clinical needs that result from food insecurity and adjustment in care plan.
4. Follow up with patients during their next office visit or by calling them within 1-2 months of food support referral.
5. Continue to screen the patient and measure the impact the referrals are having on their health status, tracking data in their EMR.

## YOU CAN ALSO REFER YOUR PATIENTS TO THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

### Patients' medical insurance

Some health plans may provide eligible members with food resources, including meal delivery. The patient should call the number on the back of their member ID to see what benefits may be available.

### Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Formerly known as food stamps)

Offers money to purchase food at grocery stores, farmers markets and other retailers. The average benefit is about \$127 per month per person. The household must meet requirements to be eligible.  
[www.fns.usda.gov/snap](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap)

### Feeding America Affiliate Food Bank

Connects patients with the local food banks and provides information on the nearest free pantries and feeding programs. Resources and requirements vary by food bank.  
[www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank](http://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank)

### Eldercare and Area Agencies on Aging

Helps older patients and their caregivers find trustworthy, local support resources, including food assistance.  
[1-800-677-1116 \(TTY: 711\)](tel:1-800-677-1116)  
[www.eldercare.acl.gov](http://www.eldercare.acl.gov)

### Meals on Wheels

Provides free or low-cost home-delivered meals to seniors. Focuses on caring for individuals whose diminished mobility makes it difficult to shop for food, prepare meals or socialize with others.  
[www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org](http://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org)

### 211 Helpline Center

Provides community information and referrals to social services for everyday needs and in times of crisis, including nutrition support. Calls are free and confidential.  
[Dial 211 from any phone](tel:211)  
[www.helplinecenter.org](http://www.helplinecenter.org)

To learn more about Humana's efforts to address food insecurity and other social determinants of health, visit [PopulationHealth.Humana.com](http://PopulationHealth.Humana.com) or connect at [BoldGoal@humana.com](mailto:BoldGoal@humana.com).

<sup>1</sup>Feeding America, Health+Hunger, Oct. 2019, <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/2019/10/food-insecurity-poverty-rates-improve-pre-recession-levels-2018-1-9-people-still-risk-hunger/>

<sup>2</sup>Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), Hunger & Health report, Dec. 2017, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-role-federal-childnutrition-programs-improving-health-well-being.pdf>