



What's the Connection?

Food Insecurity, Obesity, and Cancer

Food Insecurity – The Basics

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, due to a lack of financial resources for food at the household level.

More than 35 million people including 11 million children



were food insecure in 2019



That means almost:

1 in 9 individuals



&

1 in 7 children



live in households without consistent access to adequate food



Food insecurity disproportionately impacts racial and ethnic groups.

• Food insecurity projections for 2021 indicate slight improvements among white, non-Hispanic individuals, but remain the same for Black, non-Hispanic individuals

1 in 12 white, non-Hispanic individuals



1 in 6 Latino individuals



1 in 5 Black, non-Hispanic individuals



1 in 4 Native American individuals



Evidence supports a link between food insecurity and obesity among low-income women, particularly women with children

Obesity and Cancer

Nearly 20% (1 in 5) of all cancer cases are caused by a combination of:

- excess body fat
- physical inactivity
- excess alcohol consumption
- poor nutrition



Excess body fat is associated with an **increased risk** of **13 different cancer types**

A 2019 study found that incidence rates for **6 of 12 obesity-related cancers** are on the rise in adults ages 22-37

Food Insecurity and Health

Those experiencing food insecurity are at a higher risk for obesity and certain cancers for a variety of interconnected reasons:



Nutritious Food Access

Nutrient-rich foods, such as fruits and vegetables, are harder to obtain, while energy dense, nutrient-poor foods and drinks are abundant and often highly marketed



Transportation

“Vehicle access is perhaps the most important determinant of whether or not a family can access affordable and nutritious food,” according to the USDA



Budget

Households with fewer resources may try to stretch their budgets by purchasing inexpensive foods that have lower nutritional quality

Trade-Offs to Meet Basic Needs

Households and individuals without enough resources to meet their basic needs are forced to make tradeoffs:



Food



Housing



Transportation



Healthcare



“Feast or Famine”

People without enough resources to buy adequate food often cycle between food deprivation when resources are scarce, and overeating when food is available. This situation can contribute to weight gain and metabolic changes that result in fat storage. This can be especially problematic for mothers who often restrict their own eating to protect their children from hunger.

Strategies for Addressing Food Insecurity

Health Systems



- Implement standardized patient screening to identify food insecurity
- Connect eligible patients to federal and/or state anti-hunger programs, such as SNAP and WIC
- Increase patient access to healthy food through a free meal program, on-site food pantry, and/or subsidized or discounted produce partnership
- Increase nutrition education and food literacy by offering cooking classes/grocery store tours to the community

Research



- Food insecurity has not been well-examined within the context of cancer prevention
- There remains a general lack of understanding on the role of nutrition and food insecurity among low-income cancer survivors

Communities



- Community-based institutions, including camps, community centers, and health clinics, can act as sites for the USDA Summer Food Service program
- Farmers’ markets can accept SNAP and WIC benefits and offer incentives for fruit and vegetable purchases
- Incentives and financial assistance can be provided to small food retailers, so they are able to offer healthier options in order to be a SNAP and WIC vendor
- Food pantries can offer healthy options and provide nutrition and cooking classes to their clients
- Mobile markets can increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables
- Transportation solutions can increase access to healthy foods
- Corporate partners, especially in the grocery sector, can help support community-based programs to provide access to affordable, healthy food