



# Nutrition, Physical Activity, Body Weight, and Cancer Survivorship

**2022**

A 6-Part Informational Series for Healthcare Teams



## Food Insecurity Among Cancer Survivors





## FOOD INSECURITY AMONG CANCER SURVIVORS

This is brief 5 of 6 in the *Nutrition, Physical Activity, Body Weight, and Cancer Survivorship* series for healthcare teams that work page header open with cancer survivors.

The Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are factors that affect the overall health of people, whether they are cancer survivors or not. The core SDOH factors are economic stability, food security, neighborhood and built environment, social and community context, educational level, and access to health care. Food insecurity is an SDOH factor that can be particularly important to cancer survivors.

### Food Insecurity Among Cancer Survivors

The USDA defines food insecurity as the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food insecurity is known to be associated with poorer diet quality<sup>1</sup> and increased risk of adverse health outcomes, such as diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and depression.



The association between food insecurity and cancer outcomes is poorly understood.<sup>2,3</sup> However, recent studies suggest a high prevalence of food insecurity among cancer survivors. Estimates of food insecurity among survivors vary from 17% to 56%, depending on what populations were studied. One study found a 17.4% prevalence of food insecurity among primarily non-Hispanic white cancer patients at an academic cancer center.<sup>4</sup> In a study of low-income, multiethnic patients receiving care in a major city, 56% of the patients had food insecurity.<sup>5</sup> In a study using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data, having a diagnosis of cancer was associated with a 39% increase likelihood of food insecurity.<sup>6</sup> In a recent study from the **American Cancer Society** among cancer survivors, 27% aged 18-39, 14.8% aged 40-64, and 6.3% aged 65+ reported severe/moderate food insecurity.<sup>7</sup>

It is well-documented that a cancer diagnosis results in financial hardship for many cancer patients. This hardship can force patients to make trade-offs between food and other resources such as medical care. For example, the **Hunger in America 2014** survey found that approximately 66% of households receiving food resources from the Feeding America network of food banks had to choose between paying for food and medicine or medical care.<sup>8</sup> In a recent study of cancer survivors, those who were experiencing food insecurity were significantly more likely than their food-secure counterparts to report foregoing, delaying, or making changes to their prescription medications or other treatments, specialists visits, follow-up care, and mental health services.<sup>9</sup>



## Addressing Food Insecurity in the Healthcare Setting

As the intersection of food insecurity and adverse health outcomes becomes clear, hospitals and health systems are increasingly implementing interventions and strategies to try to address this need with their patients. These interventions vary by community needs and capacity of the health system but generally follow the “screen and intervene” model.<sup>10</sup>

 Screen	 Intervene
<p>While there is no formal recommendation for food insecurity screening in the oncology clinical setting, emerging evidence of high prevalence among cancer survivors, coupled with the well-documented importance of adequate nourishment during and after cancer treatment, suggests that health systems and healthcare teams should consider implementing routine food insecurity screening of cancer patients.</p> <p>The 2-question <b>Hunger Vital Sign (HVS)</b> screening tool has been validated in both adult and pediatric patients and incorporated into many electronic health record systems and allows clinicians to quickly assess the food needs of a patient.<sup>11</sup> Patients screen positive for food insecurity using the HVS if they respond “often true” or “sometimes true” to either or both of the following statements: “Within the past 12 months we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more,” and “Within the past 12 months the food we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more.”<sup>3, 12</sup></p>	<p>When patients are identified through screening as experiencing food insecurity, health systems can intervene in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refer patients to existing community resources to meet immediate food needs, such as food banks/pantries and other emergency food programs.</li> <li>Connect patients with federal nutrition programs to meet their longer-term nutrition needs, such as SNAP, WIC, or other programs. There may be additional programs available in communities, such as incentive programs or fruit and vegetable voucher programs.</li> <li>Host new food distributions programs in the health care system, such as on-site food pantries, mobile food markets, food boxes, or medically-tailored meals delivery programs.</li> </ul> <p>The <b>Food Insecurity and Health Resource Toolkit</b>, developed through a partnership between Humana and Feeding America, gives detailed guidance for health professionals on incorporating screening for food insecurity and referral to existing resources.</p>



In addition, **Food Insecurity and the Role of Hospitals** from the **American Hospital Association** outlines steps that hospitals and health systems can take to address food insecurity among their patients. It includes case studies of hospitals that have built successful partnerships to address food insecurity.

# Resources and References



## Resources – For Providers

Source	Resources	Link
Children’s Health Watch	Hunger Vital Sign Food Insecurity Screener	<a href="https://childrenshealthwatch.org/public-policy/hunger-vital-sign/">https://childrenshealthwatch.org/public-policy/hunger-vital-sign/</a>
Feeding America/Humana	Food Insecurity and Health Resource Toolkit	<a href="https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/resource/food-insecurity-screening-toolkit">https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/resource/food-insecurity-screening-toolkit</a>
American Hospital Association	Food Insecurity and the Role of Hospitals	<a href="https://www.aha.org/system/files/hpoe/Reports-HPOE/2017/determinants-health-food-insecurity-role-of-hospitals.pdf">https://www.aha.org/system/files/hpoe/Reports-HPOE/2017/determinants-health-food-insecurity-role-of-hospitals.pdf</a>
American Cancer Society	What’s the Connection? Food Insecurity, Obesity, and Cancer	<a href="https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FI_WhatsTheConnection_updated2021.pdf">https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FI_WhatsTheConnection_updated2021.pdf</a>
American Cancer Society	Food Insecurity: Root Causes and Impact on Cancer Survivors and Caregivers	<a href="https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FI_Cancer-Survivors-and-Caregivers_Updated-2021.pdf">https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FI_Cancer-Survivors-and-Caregivers_Updated-2021.pdf</a>

## Resources – For Patients

Source	Resources	Link
American Cancer Society	Food Insecurity Resources and Tips for Cancer Survivors and Caregivers	<a href="https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Caregiver-FI-Services-and-Tips-8.20.20.pdf">https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Caregiver-FI-Services-and-Tips-8.20.20.pdf</a>



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