

How common is food insecurity among older adults?

8 March 2018

Social issues such as hunger, inadequate housing, social isolation, and poverty are linked to poor health, especially as we age. When community organizations and healthcare systems coordinate with each other, they are better able to help us address these concerns individually and as a society.

Food insecurity occurs when people lack access to food or go hungry due to poverty or other challenges. Food insecurity is a serious problem for many older adults. For example, in 2015, 8.3 percent of American households with a family member aged 65 or older and 9.2 percent of all older adults experienced food insecurity.

A research team from the Institute for Health Research, Kaiser Permanente, Colorado, designed a study to learn more about food insecurity and older adults. Their study was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers examined information from a health survey that was given to more than 50,000 older adults between 2012 and 2015. The survey was part of a free Annual Wellness Visit for Medicare members in Kaiser Permanente Colorado. It included a question about food security.

More than 50,000 people answered the question about food insecurity. More than 2,950 people (almost 6 percent) said that they did not always have enough money to buy the food they needed.

The study revealed that:

- Food insecurity was least common (4.8 percent) in people 85-years-old or older.
- Food insecurity was most common (6.2 percent) in people between the ages of 75 and 84.
- More than 25 percent of people with both Medicaid (government insurance for people

living below the federal poverty line) and Medicare ([government insurance](#) for older adults) reported having food insecurity.

Food insecurity was more common among:

- [Women](#)
- People without a spouse or partner
- Those who used tobacco or alcohol
- People with [high blood pressure](#), [diabetes](#), or diagnosed [depression](#)
- People who had been hospitalized, visited an emergency department, or had lived in a [nursing home](#) in the year before the survey

Food [insecurity](#) was reported by 10 percent or more of people who had:

- Fair or poor general health or quality-of-life
- Oral or dental problems
- Trouble with bathing, eating, dressing, and performing other activities of daily living
- A [poor diet](#) (they ate no fruits or vegetables, or they ate fewer than two meals a day)
- [No one to call for help](#)

The researchers said that ways to identify [food insecurity](#) in older [adults](#) needed to be combined with methods to connect [older adults](#) with community-based [food](#) resources.

More information: John F. Steiner et al, Food Insecurity in Older Adults in an Integrated Health Care System, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15285](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.15285)

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