



College of
Public Health



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Food insecurity in older Iowans: A brief review of the relevant literature

What we did

We reviewed the literature around food insecurity in older adults and strategies used to prevent or address this problem.

What we found

Who is at risk for being food insecure? Risk factors for food insecurity include: low socioeconomic status,² being a member of racial/ethnic minority group,² divorce or separation,¹ renting their home,¹ living with a grandchild present in the home,¹ obesity,³ living with one or more chronic diseases,⁴ and living with functional limitations.⁵ Also, older adults living in rural areas and in Southern or Midwestern states are more likely to experience food insecurity.²

Why does food insecurity matter for older Iowans? Food insecure older adults are at an especially high risk for a number of physical and mental health problems, including poor dietary/nutrient intake,² malnutrition,⁶ compromised functional status,^{7, 8} chronic diseases (e.g., cardiovascular disease and depression),^{7, 9-12} and lower quality of life.¹³ Food insecurity is also associated with cost-related medication non-adherence¹⁴⁻¹⁸ and it increases overall healthcare use and costs.^{19,20-22}

What is already being done to help food insecure older Iowans? There are a number of governmental programs to address older adult food insecurity. These include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, Commodity Supplemental Food Program, Congregate Nutrition Services, and Home Delivered Nutrition Services.^{23,24} However, these programs may not be available to everyone who could use them, are underused by older adults, and some require transportation to access, which is a barrier for many older adults.²⁴⁻²⁸ Emergency food services (which include food banks, food pantries, and meal sites) have stepped in to fill the gap in government services.²⁹

How are food banks helping older adults? Beyond providing food, there are a number of innovative ways emergency food services are better meeting the needs of their older clients. Food banks have been a number of programs to address food insecurity in older adults including tailoring foods for older adults, running senior mobile pantries and hospital pantries, providing farmers market vouchers, and implementing home delivered or take home bag programs.³⁰ Other strategies include working with local food producers to provide more fresh, healthy foods,³¹ introducing nutrition labeling systems,^{32,33} providing additional disease management support and appropriate foods for their clients' chronic conditions,³⁴ and establishing partnerships with medical clinics and senior housing facilities to reach more in-need older adults.³⁵⁻³⁷

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