

Hungry children and youth have more health problems

August 2 2010

Children and youth who experience hunger appear more likely to have health problems, and repeated episodes of hunger may be particularly toxic, according to a report in the August issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

Food insecurity—a lack of adequate access to food for financial reasons—affected approximately 15 percent of American households in 2008, according to background information in the article. This marks an increase from 11 percent in 2007 and the highest prevalence since monitoring began in 1995. Child hunger is an extreme manifestation of food insecurity, defined as a period of time when children experience being hungry because their family has run out of food or the money to buy food.

Sharon I. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., M.H.Sc., R.D., now of the National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Md., and then of the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and colleagues analyzed data from a Canadian survey of 5,809 children age 10 to 15 years and 3,333 youth age 16 to 21 years over a 10-year period, from 1994 to 2004-2005. During this time, 3.3 percent of children and 3.9 percent of youth had ever experienced hunger and 1.1 percent of children and 1.4 percent of youth were hungry at two or more time points.

Overall, more than one in 10 children (13.5 percent) and one in four youth (28.6 percent) reported poor health in the final round of the survey. Rates of poor health were higher among those who were hungry

at any time than among those who had never experienced hunger (32.9 percent vs. 12.8 percent for children and 47.3 percent vs. 27.9 percent for youth). The association between hunger and poor health among children persisted after adjustment for baseline health and for other household markers of disadvantage, including low income and lack of home ownership.

Although one episode of hunger was not associated with chronic conditions or with asthma, youth who were hungry more than once during the survey were more likely to have asthma or any chronic illness than those who had never been hungry.

"The mechanism by which childhood hunger negatively affects health is not well understood. Food insecurity has been associated with emotional and psychological stress among children, which could exert a negative effect on general health and contribute to heightened risk of chronic diseases," the authors write. "While abnormal body weight may also negatively influence health and increase vulnerability to a range of chronic conditions, the existing research has not confirmed an association between food insecurity and body weight among children."

"The findings of this study add to the literature showing that [hunger](#) is a serious risk factor for long-term poor health among children and youth, pointing to the relevance of severe food insecurity as an identifiable marker of vulnerability," the authors conclude. "Clinicians should familiarize themselves with risk factors for household food insecurity, which are largely related to economic disadvantage, and take steps to ensure that potentially vulnerable families receive available support. The findings also reinforce the need for advocacy for policy interventions to eliminate problems of poverty and [food insecurity](#), which pose an unacceptable but remediable risk to [children](#)."

More information: *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2010;164[8]:754-762.

Provided by JAMA and Archives Journals

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