

Food pantries can help improve nutrition, diet quality

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Heather Eicher-Miller, an associate professor in the College of Health and Human Sciences' Department of Nutrition Science and director of Indiana's Emergency Food Resource Network. Credit: Purdue University

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 37 million people nationally live in food-insecure households. For those who visit food pantries, the frequency of their visits matters.

That's the conclusion of a study led by a Purdue University nutrition scientist who studies [food insecurity](#) and access to adequate and safe foods.

Heather Eicher-Miller, an associate professor in the College of Health and Human Sciences' Department of Nutrition Science and director of Indiana's Emergency Food Resource Network, led a research team that looked at diets and health issues affecting 270 participants at 27 [food pantries](#) in Indiana. The team's study appeared in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*.

"The [dietary quality](#) was higher for those who used the food pantry more frequently," Eicher-Miller said. "Dietary quality is an important risk factor for chronic disease, so it may potentially have an impact on health."

Study participants had very poor diet quality scores that were much lower than the average American, which means the variety and types of foods they ate fell far below dietary recommendations.

Diet quality is related to [chronic diseases](#) and their risk factors, such as hypertension, obesity and high cholesterol. Presenting with these risk factors increase the chances for heart disease, stroke, diabetes and other poor health outcomes. The study showed that groups who had less access to food had greater chances of having heart disease.

"All of the food groups are important and offer [essential nutrients](#), so all are key," Eicher-Miller said. "We determined that those who visited food pantries more than once a month consumed a more healthful mix

of foods or variety and quality compared with those who visited less often."

Eicher-Miller said donating money is preferred by most food pantries, as it allows more flexibility in purchasing certain foods they know are frequently chosen and used by families.

"If you specifically want to donate food, items with little added sugar, saturated fat and sodium, which are the nutrients that all Americans should limit, can help to improve the dietary quality of the foods offered at food pantries," Eicher-Miller said.

"The inventory at a food pantry may change dramatically depending on what donations or shipments they receive. Many donations from businesses and organizations, including grocery stores and government agencies, may give them a large supply of certain items."

Yibin Liu of the University at Buffalo, Yumin Zhang of Purdue University, and Daniel T. Remley of Ohio State University assisted with this study. This research was funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

More information: Yibin Liu et al. Frequency of Food Pantry Use Is Associated with Diet Quality among Indiana Food Pantry Clients, *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jand.2019.02.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2019.02.015)

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