

Food insufficiency linked to lack of mental health services during pandemic

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A new national study published in *Public Health Nutrition* on July 15 found that Americans experiencing food insufficiency were three times as likely to lack mental health support during the COVID-19 pandemic than those not experiencing food insufficiency.

The most extreme form of food insecurity, food insufficiency occurs when families do not have enough eat. Among a nationally representative sample of 68,611 adults who participated in the US Census Household Pulse Survey in October 2020, 11% reported food insufficiency. Of those, 24% also reported an unmet mental health need compared to 9% of food-sufficient adults.

"Hunger, exhaustion, and stress related to not getting enough food to eat may lead to depression and anxiety," says lead author, Jason Nagata, MD, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco.

"The experience of food insecurity could lead affected people to prioritize food over other needs such as seeking [health care](#), using up considerable time and energy to navigate food pantries and free meal services, or locate and visit affordable food stores."

Food insufficiency was also associated with higher use of psychiatric medications: 27% of food-insufficient adults reported psychiatric medication use compared to 19% of food-sufficient adults.

"To better address these problems, [medical professionals](#), [social workers](#), and clinicians can screen patients for both symptoms of anxiety and depression to ensure they have sufficient access to food," says co-author Kyle T. Ganson, Ph.D., assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

The researchers argue that clinicians should assess for food insecurity and provide referrals to food assistance programs.

"Policymakers should focus on increasing funding for food assistance and mental health services as part of pandemic relief legislation," says Nagata. "Expanding access to supplemental [food](#) programs may help to

mitigate the need for more [mental health](#) services during the pandemic."

More information: Jason M. Nagata et al, Food insufficiency and mental health service utilization in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Public Health Nutrition* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S1368980021003001](#)

Provided by University of Toronto

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