

# Access to food assistance programs may improve sleep outcomes in older adults

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Older adults who utilize food assistance programs to reliably access quality food may fall asleep quicker and stay asleep longer than their peers who do not use such programs, according to a new study by

researchers in the Penn State Department of Nutritional Sciences.

Ashley Flores, who anticipates earning her doctorate in nutritional sciences from Penn State in August, and Muzi Na, associate professor of nutritional sciences, led this study. The results were recently [published](#) in *Nutrition Journal*.

The national rate of food insecurity in households with adults aged 65 years and older increased from 6.9% in 2020 to 9.1% in 2022, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

"The prevalence of food insecurity among [older adults](#) is a significant public health concern, especially since it impacts various health outcomes, including [sleep](#)," Flores said. "Unfortunately, this area has been relatively understudied, so our goal was to examine the association between food sufficiency and various sleep outcomes in older adults."

To better understand this association, researchers examined data from 1,665 participants in the 2013 and 2014 National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS), an on-going annual project that includes annual interviews with Medicare beneficiaries ages 65 and older. These interviews include questions on their [socioeconomic status](#), food sufficiency status and experience and sleep behavior, among other information, and the 2013 and 2014 years included a sleep-focused module.

Participants were classified in one of three food-sufficiency groups: food insufficient, food sufficient with the use of food assistance programs or food sufficient without the use of food assistance programs. Sleep behavior data included total sleep hours, total nighttime sleep hours and sleep latency, or the time it takes for one to fall asleep.

"We found that older adults who reported that they are food sufficient

through the use of food assistance programs reported more hours of sleep, more nighttime sleep hours and were less likely to experience longer sleep latency compared to those who are food sufficient, but do not utilize food assistance programs," Na said.

"Those who reported that they were food insufficient were not found to be significantly linked to any sleep outcomes in this study."

Na noted that their findings suggest that food assistance programs may help to increase certain sleep outcomes in older adults. However, she explained that participants who reported they were food secure without the use of food assistance programs may have achieved food security through other means, but their food sufficiency status doesn't mean that they have more reliable access to food than those who use those programs.

"Further research is needed to understand the underlying causes between food sufficiency status and various sleep outcomes as well as long-term effects on other health outcomes," Na said.

Although more research is needed to understand the relationship between food sufficiency and sleep outcomes, researchers said that a key takeaway from their study is the importance of supporting [food security](#) in older adults.

"Our study demonstrates the need to address food insecurity among older adults as part of a larger public health concern," Flores said. "As our findings suggest that the use of food assistance programs may support certain sleep outcomes, expanding these programs to a broader audience may offer others the same benefits."

Nan Dou, who graduated from Penn State with a doctorate in nutritional sciences in May 2022, and Christopher Sarpong, who graduated from

Penn State with a bachelor's degree in science in May 2023, collaborated on this project.

**More information:** Ashley C. Flores et al, Food sufficiency status and sleep outcomes in older adults: the National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS), *Nutrition Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s12937-024-00918-4](#)

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