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Hunger is a U.S. Health Issue

The relationship between eating well and good health is solidly acknowledged. We learn from an early age that “you are what you eat” and consuming fruits and vegetables is important. With the growth of the obesity epidemic, much of the attention on food consumption in America has focused on the volume, caloric density and fat content of food consumed, with good reason. What’s often missing in our discussion of good health and food consumption is the tragic level of hunger in America.

In the richest nation, millions suffer the pangs of hunger and their health – and the health of the nation – suffers as a result.

A moral imperative

- Every day, healthcare providers across the nation see the effects of hunger on health
- Hungry people are 2.9 times more likely to be in poor health and have a higher likelihood of chronic conditions
- They are also 2.45 times more likely to be obese as a result of poor nutrition
- Newborns are 1.81 times more likely to be underweight, often leading to lifelong development and chronic conditions
- Experiences with hunger had a negative impact on the health of children 10 – 15 years later
- Children who are hungry are 4 times more likely to need professional counseling; and
- Hungry teens are 5 times more likely to commit suicide

...Meets a financial health crisis

- Estimates put healthcare costs related to hunger, nationwide, at \$130.5 billion each year
- Hospitalizations account for \$16.1 billion of that \$130.5 billion annual cost
- Depression accounts for \$29.2 billion of those costs; and another \$19.7 billion is related to suicide
- Poor health, in general, costs \$38.9 billion annually, with Upper GI disorders costing \$5.7 billion, and colds, migraines and iron deficiency account for \$3.5 billion
- For every \$1 spent on food, and feeding an individual who is food insecure or experiencing hunger, approximately \$50 is saved in Medicaid expenses
- It is less expensive to feed an individual healthy food for a year, than to cover the costs of hospitalization and related medical expenses for one day



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Hunger affects individuals at every age – from birth through end of life

- 62% of Feeding America households with children younger than 18 reported participating in the national school lunch program, but only 14% reported having a child participate in a summer feeding program that provides free food when school is not in session during summer.
- In 2011, 8.4% of households with seniors (2.5 million) were food insecure; this number is projected to increase by 50% when the youngest of the Baby Boom generation reach age 60 in 2025.
- 30% of Feeding America households with seniors indicated they have had to choose between food and medical care and 35% have had to choose between food and paying utilities.

Emotional and Behavioral Problems

Hunger causes emotional and behavioral problems, and limits social development. Children who are hungry, and who live in homes where finances cause a stressful environment, often have difficulty socializing with peers and exhibit troublesome behavior due to stress, fatigue, poor concentration and poor coping skills. Likewise, adults who are hungry have decreased ability to perform work and are at greater risk of losing and/or being able to maintain employment. Fatigue and malnourishment at all ages exacerbates chronic disease, mental health and overall general.

- Adults experiencing food insecurity are at greater risk of developing type II diabetes and more likely to experience mental and behavioral health problems, including higher levels of depression and anxiety.
- Among the elderly, malnutrition exacerbates diseases, increases disability, decreases resistance to infection, and extends hospital stays.
- Malnutrition results in increases costs for caregivers by increasing caregiver demands, and inflates national health care costs due to increased complication rates.
- Children who are hungry are 4 times more likely to need professional counseling; and
- Children experiencing severe hunger have higher levels of chronic illness and internalizing behavior problems.
- These linkages are important given the significant human and economic toll chronic diseases exact. Chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, depression, and heart and lung diseases affect nearly one in two Americans and consume more than 80% of what we spend on health care every year. Today, these illnesses cause seven out of 10 deaths.

For additional information please contact the Alliance to End Hunger at info@alliancetoendhunger.org or visit our website at www.alliancetoendhunger.org

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