



Fostering Strategic Partnerships | Building Political Will | Creating Global Connections

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 on Earth, 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 more likely to be in poor health and have a higher likelihood of chronic conditions.ⁱ
- Food insecure adults have 32% increased odds of being obese compared to food secure adults.ⁱⁱ
- Newborns are more likely to be underweight, often leading to lifelong development and chronic conditions.
- Experiences with hunger have a negative impact on the health of children 10-15 years later.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Hungry teens are more likely to be depressed and attempt suicide.^{iv}

...Meets a financial health crisis

- Estimates put healthcare costs related to hunger nationwide at a minimum of \$160 billion each year.^v
- Hospitalizations account for \$11.5 billion of these annual costs.^{vi}
- Mental health problems account for \$57.1 billion of these costs; and another \$21.6 billion is related to suicide.^{vii}
- Poor health, in general, costs \$46 billion annually, nutrition and digestion disorders cost \$7.1 billion, and non-communicable diseases account for another \$7.1 billion.^{viii}
- For every \$1 spent on food and feeding, an individual who is food insecure or experiencing hunger, approximately \$50 is saved in Medicaid expenses.^{ix}
- According to the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, it is 50% less expensive to cover the costs of feeding an adult individual healthy food for a year than to cover the costs of hospitalization and related medical expenses for one day.^{x,xi}



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

- During the school year, 22 million children receive free or reduced-price lunch, while only 3.9 million children participated in the Summer Food Service Program.^{xii}
- In 2016, 24.2% of seniors were ‘marginally food insecure,’ ‘food insecure,’ or ‘very low food insecure;’ this is a 200% increase since 2001, and as the American population ages, food insecurity among seniors is expected to rise.^{xiii}
- More than 63 percent of older adult households served by the Feeding America network must sometimes choose between paying for food or paying for medical care or prescriptions. Sixty percent report having to choose between paying for utilities or paying for food, and 58 percent must choose between food and transportation.^{xiv}

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 a decreased ability to perform work and are at greater risk of unemployment. Fatigue and malnourishment at all ages exacerbates chronic disease, mental health and overall general.^{xv,xvi}

- 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.^{xvii,xviii,xix}
- Among the elderly, malnutrition increases the risk for developing chronic diseases and exacerbates current ones, increases disability, decreases resistance to infection, and extends hospital stays.^{xx,xxi}
- Malnutrition results in increased costs for caregivers by increasing caregiver demands, and it inflates national health care costs due to increased complication rates.^{xxii,xxiii}
- Children who are hungry are 4 times more likely to need professional counseling.^{xxiv}
- Children experiencing hunger have higher levels of chronic illness and behavior problems.^{xxv,xxvi}
- These linkages are important given the significant human and economic toll chronic diseases exact. Six in 10 Americans are affected by one chronic disease, such as diabetes or heart disease, and 4 in 10 have two or more chronic diseases. Chronic diseases are the leading contributors to America’s \$3.3 trillion in health care costs.^{xxvii}

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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