

PROVIDER TIPS

Food Insecurity

What is Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as "a lack of continuous access to enough food for an active, healthy life." Food insecurity refers to a lack of adequate food resources at the family level, rather than a personal, bodily experience of hunger.

Understanding Food Insecurity

Low-income families are affected by multiple overlapping issues, including lack of affordable housing, social isolation, chronic or acute health problems, high medical costs, and low wages. Food insecurity is closely related to poverty, but not all people living below the poverty line experience food insecurity.

Five components of food insecurity:

1. Availability of food
2. Access to food
3. Utilization of food
4. Stability
5. Malnutrition

Who is Impacted?

Food insecurity is a critical health problem that impacts children and families across the country in both rural and urban settings.

Food insecurity has numerous detrimental impacts on the health and well-being of children and their families. Screening for food insecurity allows pediatricians to identify children and families in need and can connect them with resources.

Individuals who miss meals are more likely to have higher risks of health conditions like anemia, asthma, or diabetes and could also develop social and behavioral problems.

Children who are experiencing food insecurity may present signs of nutritional deficiencies that can manifest in the following ways:

- Developmental delays
- Behavioral problems
- Depression, anxiety, or stress
- Iron deficiency, anemia, or other nutrient deficiencies
- Underweight or overweight
- Slow growth
- Inappropriate feeding practices
- Dental caries

GOAL: To Identify & Address Food Insecurity in a Health Care Setting

Food insecurity in health care settings will be addressed differently depending on community needs, as well as the goals and capacity of the partner organizations. However, successful partnerships have three things in common:

1. IDENTIFY

Identify patients living in food-insecure households while they are in a health care setting.

Several professional societies, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Diabetes Association, recommend screening patients for food insecurity. Take the following steps:

A. PREPARE

- Educate and train staff on food insecurity, federal nutrition programs, and local food and income resources.
- Follow AAPs recommendation of universal screening at scheduled check-ups or sooner, if indicated.
- Incorporate efforts to address food insecurity into the institutional workflow.
- Practice having empathetic and sensitive conversations.

B. SCREEN

- Use the Hunger Vital Sign 2-question food insecurity screening tool. Read out loud to the patient and their family the following two statements.

“ Within the past 12 months we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.”

“ Within the past 12 months the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more.”

- For each statement, ask the patient and their family to state, “Often true;” “Sometimes true;” or “Never true.”
- If they answer that either or both statements is “Often true,” or “Sometimes true,” their household is identified as being at risk for food insecurity.

C. INTERVENE

- Administer appropriate medical interventions per your office protocols.

2. CONNECT

Connect families to needed community resources, food bank agencies, and programs to connect them with healthy food access.

Assist with applications for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other long-term nutrition supports like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

3. CREATE

Create new food distribution programs in the health care facility when there is sufficient need, interest, and capacity, and/or community resources are insufficient.

Community First Health Plans Community Food Pantries

Community First has developed community food pantries for those facing food insecurity due to a lack of access to food and other items. Community First food pantries are designed to provide essential, non-perishable items in trusted and easily accessible locations throughout San Antonio and surrounding areas.

We collaborate with schools, public libraries, civic organizations, businesses, churches, and other groups to facilitate donations and bring Community First Food Pantries to their communities.

Community First food pantries are designed with several unique features:

1. Open seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and freely accessible to all, removing barriers to food access.
2. Free-standing, weather-proof, and conveniently located outdoors. All maintenance and upkeep are provided by Community First.
3. 100% free: No cost, no registration, no sign-up.
4. Conveniently located to help communities where people may be affected by food insecurity.

Our community food pantries are located throughout Bexar County, and we are rapidly adding more locations. For a current list and map of our food pantry locations or to request a food pantry be installed on your grounds, please visit CommunityFirstHealthPlans.com/Food-Pantry.

