

BACK PAGES

Food allergies increase challenges for people facing food insecurity

The *Associated Press* article, “Food allergies complicate hungry Americans’ search for meals,” reported that, for millions of Americans newly experiencing food insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, those with food allergies and intolerances are facing “a particular crisis” in that most charitable and government food programs offer limited food options that are safely edible for those clients.

Limited safe food options, even with government assistance

Under normal conditions, food pantries may offer gluten-free products or display information about allergen content. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most pantries have been forced to limit food options and have changed to contactless distribution models, where clients drive up to obtain a pre-packaged bag of food.

The *AP* article also explained that clients using government assistance programs find similar challenges. The United States Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) offers beans as a substitute for peanut butter (an impractical option for making sandwiches) and soy milk as a substitute for cow’s milk, but some people cannot tolerate either type.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food



WHEAT FREE



DAIRY FREE



NUT FREE



GLUTEN FREE



SUGAR FREE



SHELLFISH FREE



LACTOSE FREE



EGG FREE

and Nutrition Service. (i.e., food stamps) enables families to make their own food choices. However, specialized foods like gluten-free bread or sunflower seed butter are often much more expensive; in some stores, costing two to four times that of conventional products.

The Food Equality Initiative

Emily Brown was confronted with a similar challenge more than eight years ago when attempting to find food at a pantry for her two-year-old who has multiple food allergies. The only items her daughter could tolerate were potatoes and salsa!

Believing that other families had the same need, she founded the Food Equality Initiative (FEI) in 2014 in Kansas City, Missouri. In

2015, FEI and the New Haven SDA Church launched ReNewed Health, the first allergy-friendly and gluten-free food pantry in the United States.

Today, the Food Equality Initiative supports approximately 200 families with food allergies or celiac disease (i.e., gluten intolerance), providing them \$150 per month to use in an online marketplace that offers allergy-friendly foods. Some clients use the benefit to supplement government food assistance programs. As FEI explains on their website, “by subsidizing the extra costs of foods free from allergies and gluten, FEI [can] help ease the financial and psychological strain of a diagnosis of food-related illness on under-resourced individuals and families.”

A definition of food insecurity

Feeding America, a network of more than 200 food banks and one of the largest such organizations in the United States, defines food insecurity as “a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life.”

Porchlight Community Services

The *AP* article also discussed Porchlight Community Services, a San Diego pantry dedicated to serving people with food allergies. In 2016, it was founded by Claudia Montenegro, who was struggling to afford allergy-friendly foods for her gluten and dairy intolerances. She and friends decided to pool their money in order to buy in bulk and shop at sales. News of their work spread and soon she was distributing food from her porch.

Nowadays, Porchlight is a volunteer-operated food pantry that serves clients who are allergic to nuts, dairy, gluten and wheat, shellfish, egg and soy, as well as those who are diabetic. Clients are asked to pay \$35 per week if they can, but those who cannot are still welcome. Volunteers purchase all of the food and shoppers can choose items such as coconut-based yogurts, nut butters, lactose-free milk and gluten-free flour.

Gathering more data

According to the *AP* article, Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) estimates that 32 million people have a food allergy and 85 million people live in a household where someone has a food allergy or intolerance. However, there is little or no comprehensive data.

To address this, Brown is working with the Center for Food Allergy & Asthma Research at Northwestern University to gather information about the number of people

with allergies who are experiencing food insecurity. In addition, FEI collaborates with healthcare providers, local and national non-profit organizations, government agencies, schools and food manufacturers to assist clients.

References

Content for this article was based on and excerpted from:

- Ronayne Kathleen, Food allergies complicate hungry Americans' search for meals, *AP News*, June 10, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/food-allergies-health-allergies-coronavirus-pandemic-8da1963de9355b4d375f9955265689bb>.
- Food Equality Initiative. <https://foodequalityinitiative.org>.
- Feeding America. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/search/node?q=food+insecurity+definition>

Is food insecurity associated with asthma? Study results conflict

Multiple studies have been conducted to determine whether food insecurity is associated with asthma and, if so, to evaluate the extent of such a relationship. However, results are conflicting as the following brief descriptions show.

Not Associated. In “Childhood Food Insecurity and Incident Asthma: A Population-Based Cohort Study of Children in Ontario, Canada” by Clemens, et al., the authors noted that “childhood food insecurity has been associated with prevalent asthma in cross-sectional studies [yet] little is known about the relationship between food insecurity and incident asthma.” Using administrative databases linked with the Canadian Community Health

Survey, they conducted a retrospective cohort study of children less than 18 years old in Ontario, Canada. Among the 27,746 included children, 5.1% lived in food insecure households. They concluded that “food insecure children have numerous medical and social challenges. However, [they] did not observe that childhood food insecurity was associated with an increased risk of incident asthma when adjusted for important clinical and socioeconomic confounders.” *PLOS ONE*, June 9, 2021. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0252301>.

Associated. A team led Mangini, LD, et al. has published multiple papers on the topic. The objective of the study described in their 2015 paper, “Household Food Insecurity is Associated with Childhood Asthma,” was “to determine the association between food insecurity and asthma in a diverse sample of children.” The authors analyzed cross-sectional data from 11,099 third graders from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort. They concluded that “food insecurity is positively associated with asthma in US third graders, and household poverty strengthens the association.” *The Journal of Nutrition*, October 21, 2015. <https://academic.oup.com/jnl/article/145/12/2756/4585668>.

Associated. Their further study, “Timing of Household Food Insecurity Exposures and Asthma in a Cohort of US School-Aged Children,” published in 2019, evaluated the association between exposure to food insecurity in early childhood and the odds of asthma later in childhood. It also used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort, which resulted in 6,731 participants. The study concluded that “food insecurity in the year before kindergarten and in second grade were associated with a higher odds of asthma in third grade. Food insecurity

in second grade retained the signal for increased odds of asthma after third and through eighth grades.” *BMJ Open*. February 22, 2019. <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/8/11/e021683>.

Associated. Thomas, MMC, et al. studied asthma and food insecurity and further worked to “approximate the causal effects of food insecurity on children’s health and health care use outcomes.” Nationally representative data from the 2013-2016 waves of the [United States] National Health Interview Study, which included 29,341 participants, were used. In their article, “Food Insecurity and Child Health,” the authors found that “household food insecurity was related to significantly worse general health, some acute and chronic health problems, and worse health care access, including forgone care and heightened emergency department use, for children.” In particular, children in food-insecure households had lifetime asthma diagnoses that were 19.1% higher than those for children in food-secure households. *Pediatrics*. October 2019, 144(4) e20190397. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/144/4/e20190397>.

Thomas discussed the study results in an interview with *Healio* titled, “Studies Underscore Extent of Health Threats from Childhood Food Insecurity.” She highlighted the need for social support programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service. “This is clear evidence that food insecurity has wide-ranging negative effects on children’s health and well-being, and as such, we should make every effort to ensure no child experiences food insecurity,” she said. “My immediate recommendation is to expand the generosity of SNAP benefits and to extend SNAP benefits to more families in order to reduce food insecurity in children’s households.” *Healio*. November 12, 2019. <https://www.healio.com/news/pediatrics/20191112/studies-underscore-extent-of-health-threats-from-childhood-food-insecurity>.

8-year-old girl raises \$80,000 to fight food insecurity

An 8-year-old girl from Wisconsin is raising money to help families facing food insecurity due to COVID-19.

Using a virtual lemonade stand, Morgan Marsh-McGlone has surpassed her original goal of \$90 and, between April 2020 and July 2021, raised \$80,000. In August 2021, for the first time, she was able to open a live lemonade stand to thank supporters and continue her fundraising efforts.

All proceeds go to Little John’s Restaurant, a charity-driven, pop-up restaurant that uses excess food from restaurants to provide meals to those affected by food insecurity.

For more information:

<https://www.morganslemonaid.com>
<https://www.littlejohnskitchens.org>