

How one minute with patients can help head off food insecurity

MAY 13, 2022

Timothy M. Smith

Senior News Writer

The perils of food insecurity extend even beyond hunger. When patients experience disruptions in food intake and eating patterns because of lack of money or other resources, it can result in low birth weight and developmental delays in children, as well as chronic kidney disease, congestive heart failure and type 2 diabetes in adults.

A podcast, "[Food Insecurity and What Clinicians Can Do About It](#)," reveals the critical role that physicians play in screening for it, starting with using a simple, validated two-question tool to rapidly identify patients at risk.

Developed by the educational nonprofit [Gaples Institute](#) in Chicago, the podcast episode is the first in a series that previews a more comprehensive, self-paced CME course, "[Nutrition Science for Health and Longevity: What Every Physician Needs to Know](#)."

Learn more about three new podcasts on nutrition for physicians.

It's probably worse than you think

Food insecurity is the lack of—or even the uncertainty about having—adequate food to support the health of all members of a household, said AMA member Stephen Devries, MD, a preventive cardiologist and the executive director of the Gaples Institute.

"Food insecurity is a shocking pervasive problem and physicians are well-positioned to identify patients in need," Dr. Devries said, noting that it has worsened in the peri-COVID-19 pandemic period. "We know that one out of every nine Americans—or more—are food insecure. One out of every nine! And there are certain groups in which food insecurity is an even bigger problem."

For example, some 21% of people living with a Black head of household are food insecure, along with 28% in households headed by single women with children. Among college students, 19% meet the definition.

Know these 2 questions to ask

One of the challenges to identifying patients who are food insecure is that there are no reliable visual cues, Dr. Devries noted. “It may be that people have recently lost their job and their financial situation has changed, so they might present with stylish clothes and appearances—and yet the situation at home can be quite dire.”

There is, however, an efficient way to screen for food insecurity.

“It involves a validated two-question screening tool. And, fortunately, it’s really quick to do,” Dr. Devries said.

Ask, within the past 12 months:

- Were you ever worried that the food you had would run out before you could get money to buy more?
- Was there ever a time when the food you had did run out and you didn’t have money to get more?

If the answer to either is often or sometimes, you should consider that patient to be food insecure, Dr. Devries said, noting that follow-up is also a two-step process.

Follow-up is easy

“What you can do, number one, is to make referrals to appropriate community resources, including social workers,” he said. “Social workers can often direct people and connect them to governmental resources like” the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program “and other food programs that could be enormously helpful to patients.”

“Second, you yourself might direct them to food-access points that you’re aware of in your community, including local food banks” Dr. Devries said, adding that it’s a good practice to have a list of those services on hand for easy distribution.



Learn more in the 2022 update of the CME course “Nutrition Science for Health and Longevity: What Every Physicians Needs to Know.” This enduring material is designated for a maximum 4 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit*[™], and helps physicians begin an effective nutrition conversation with patients. The four-hour, self-paced course is developed and hosted by the Gaples Institute for Integrative Cardiology, an educational nonprofit focused on advancing the role of nutrition and lifestyle in health care.

This course includes four modules that are distributed in collaboration with the AMA Ed Hub[™], an online platform with high-quality CME/MOC from many trusted sources to support lifelong learning of physicians and other medical professionals.

With topics relevant to you, the AMA Ed Hub also offers an easy, streamlined way to find, take and track educational activities in one place, with automatic CME/MOC credit reporting for some state and specialty boards. AMA Members qualify for a 20% discount on the Gaples Institute nutrition science course for clinicians. Call (800) 262-3211 or email msc@ama-assn.org for the discount code.

Learn more about AMA CME accreditation.