

Food Security

Food Insecurity in Older Adults in North America: Is a Different Conceptualization Needed?

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Introduction: Food insecurity (FI), the inability to acquire an adequate amount of food in socially normative ways or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so, is a significant public health problem in Canada. While FI appears to be less common among older adults, some scholars are concerned that current measures fail to identify all older adults who experience food insecurity.

Objective: To determine if a different conceptualization of FI is needed for older adults.

Methods: The peer-reviewed and grey literature was searched. Publications from 1980 to 2019 relating to FI in older adults in Canada and the United States were screened.

Results: For both older adults and those in the general population, income is the strongest predictor of FI. While the prevalence of FI is lower among older adults than among other age groups, some older adults remain vulnerable to FI: those with the lowest incomes, racialized older adults and those living in the territories. In the general population these groups are also vulnerable. For both older adults and the general population there are four common dimensions to the experience of FI: uncertainty and worry about food, inadequate quality of food, insufficient quantity of food, and social unacceptability. Additionally, the bulk of North American research in both older adults and the general population uses an income-based definition of FI.

Conclusions: Given that income remains the single greatest factor that determines FI, a new conceptualization is not needed for older adults. Just as with younger individuals, FI in older adults is the result of a lack of financial resources and reflects material deprivation

Significance: Dietitians need to be aware that while most older adults are protected from FI, there are vulnerable groups in this demographic. Dietitians can advocate for policy interventions that address the lack of financial resources in food-insecure households.

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