

Nutritional Health

The number of adults 60 and older is surging. In Texas, this population is expected to more than double from 2000 to 2030 to more than 6 million.¹ As this population grows, we need to know the factors that place older adults at a high risk of debilitating health problems and their consequences. We also need to use evidence-based approaches to help them be healthy and independent for as long as possible.

Good nutrition is crucial for healthy aging. Older adults have unique nutritional considerations that include naturally occurring physiological changes, as well as psychosocial and social factors that, when combined, strongly influence nutritional well-being. Proper nutrition helps ensure a healthy immune system, improves recovery from illness or injury, helps the body manage chronic diseases and helps maintain physical function. In contrast, poor nutritional status leads to declined functional status, increased use of health care services, more nursing home admissions and a higher likelihood of mortality.^{2,3}

Texas has one of the highest percentages of older adults struggling with hunger (>20 percent), compared to the national prevalence of 14.4 percent.⁸

KEY POINTS

- Food insecurity, limited income, ethnic minority status and physical immobility have been associated with high nutrition risk and inadequate nutrient intake in older adults.^{4,5,6}
- Compared to their food-secure counterparts, food-insecure older adults have lower nutrient intake and higher risk for chronic health conditions.⁷
- Among older adults, 31 percent live in or near poverty.⁸ Older adults living on low incomes are more likely than those of higher incomes to report not getting enough to eat and skipping meals due to lack of food.^{12,3} They are often faced with the difficult choice of buying medications or food.¹⁴ Older adults living on the lowest incomes have much lower nutrient intake than the overall older adult population.^{9,13,15,16}
- Approximately 22 percent of older Texans are isolated or living alone.⁸ Research shows people 65 and older who live alone consume fewer

calories than those who live with others.^{9,10} People living alone tend to eat less and often choose easy-to-prepare foods that are less nutritious, which puts them at risk for deficiencies.¹⁰

- Unintentional weight loss in older adults is strongly correlated with morbidity and mortality, even among older adults living independently.^{17,18,19} Malnutrition in older adults can lead to prolonged hospital stays, additional health complications and more frequent hospital readmissions, all of which have financial implications.^{9,15,20}

While aging Texans face many risks, a number of community programs exist to manage them. Charitable food assistance networks, home-delivered meal programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) address and improve the nutritional well-being of older Texans.⁷ Research highlights the positive effect home-delivered meal programs have on the nutritional status of recipients as well as their social connections.^{21,22,23,24,25,26,27} Such programs can also help older adults with low care needs live in their homes longer.

Unfortunately, participation in these programs historically has been low, and current funding does not support the demand in areas with higher participation rates.⁷ Given the high prevalence of hunger among Texas seniors and its ramifications, we must continue to engage and seek input from those in public policy, food assistance, nutrition services and healthcare. Addressing this issue through a unified effort is the best way to directly improve the health of aging Texans.

RESOURCES

Malnutrition Awareness

- Malnutrition: A Hidden Epidemic in Older Adults: youtu.be/iPNZKyXqN1U
- Defeat Malnutrition Today: defeatmalnutrition.today

Nutrition Resources for Older Adults

- Nutrition for Seniors: nutrition.gov/life-stages/seniors
- Choosing Healthy Meals as you get Older: choosemyplate.gov/older-adults
- Healthy Eating After 50: nia.nih.gov/health/smart-food-choices-healthy-aging
- What's on Your Plate? nia.nih.gov/health/publication/whats-your-plate
- Healthy Eating on a Budget for Older Adults: liveeatplay.colostate.edu/eat/eating-well/older-adult-care

- Eating Well As You Get Older: Eat Well on Your Budget: nhseniorhealth.gov/eatingwellasyougetolder/eatwellonyourbudget/01.html
- Help with Food Costs: nia.nih.gov/health/publication/whats-your-plate/help-food-costs
- National Council on Aging: ncoa.org/economic-security/benefits/food-and-nutrition/senior-nutrition

Food Assistance Providers

- Meals on Wheels Texas: mealsonwheelstexas.org
- Snap Benefits Texas: yourtexasbenefits.hhsc.texas.gov/programs/snap
- Texas Food Banks Central Texas Food Bank: centraltexasfoodbank.org
- North Texas Food Bank: ntfb.org
- West Texas Food Bank: wtxfoodbank.org
- San Antonio Food Bank: safoodbank.org
- Southeast Texas Food Bank: setxfoodbank.org
- Texas Food Pantries: foodpantries.org/st/texas
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP): fns.usda.gov/tefap/emergency-food-assistance-program-tefap

Professional Resources and Screening and Assessment Tools

- American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (ASPEN): nutritioncare.org/Guidelines_and_Clinical_Resources/Toolkits/Malnutrition_Toolkit
- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: eatright.org
- United States Department of Agriculture: nal.usda.gov/fnic/professional-and-career-resources

CITATIONS

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Meals on Wheels
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Commission

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