



Fact Sheet 25

Food Security

What is the issue?

The National Nutrition Survey undertaken in 1995 asked the question “have you run out of food, at any time in the last 12 months and had no money to buy more”. Five to eight per cent of Australians indicated they had at some stage run out of money for food. Asking the same question in 2002, to a number of refugees in Perth, 70% indicated that they have run out of food and had no money to buy more.

Having access to a safe food supply is a human right. This access to food has been termed “food security”. Food security is defined as:

- access by all people at all times to sufficient food for an active and healthy life
- the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods
- an assured ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways

Important aspects of food security include:

- economic access (having enough money or resources)
- physical access (access to transport, suitable location of food sources)
- safe access which is both socially and culturally appropriate
- secure and sustainable food access

Food insecurity is closely linked to poverty. Therefore, those most vulnerable are those whose incomes can be tenuous including: single parents, homeless people, people living in remote areas, indigenous Australians, those on low incomes, the disabled, the aged, asylum seekers, people on temporary protection visas, people in migrant resettlement programs and migrants generally.

What are the causes?

Possible causes can include:

- lack of social support
- poor understanding of English
- unfamiliarity with new foods and cooking methods
- lack of budgeting skills
- inadequate income
- shame associated with using emergency relief as this implies a lack of ability to feed the family
- inadequate access to food suppliers often due to limited transport
- lack of familiarity with the food supply system
- lack of culturally appropriate foods
- psychological consequence of refugee experience

What are the signs?

The consequences of food insecurity are severe and significant. They may include, reduced physical, mental, spiritual, social health and well being as well as reduced short-term and long-term health status.

Food insecurity is a topic that is not discussed very often. The stigma and shame of running out of food is quite strong in some communities and unless the question is asked specifically the information may not be voluntarily given. In addition, many communities do not perceive going without food as a particular problem, being a situation they are all too familiar with in their countries of origin.

Possible signs of food insecurity are difficult to ascertain but could include:

- children coming to school without having eaten breakfast and without lunch
- reluctance to invite guests home
- reluctance to bring food to share
- always saying “I’m not hungry”
- anaemia and other nutritional deficiencies
- inability to concentrate and poor attention spans

What can be done?

The lack of adequate interpreting services, the lack of knowledge about mainstream emergency relief providers and the stigma and shame of running out of money for food means that the problem is often not addressed.

Due to the lack of familiar foods available in food parcels and, in some communities, an inherent distrust with what has been provided, migrants and refugees should always be given food vouchers in order to buy food that meets their specific cultural needs. This distrust can be caused by a lack of knowledge regarding processed and packaged foods, and possible past issues relating to torture and trauma.

In the short term people need access to food without making judgement.

In the long term the causes for food insecurity need to be addressed.

- always ask your clients the question “have you run out of money to buy food” or “are you and your children eating several meals everyday”.
- provide access to food vouchers from your organisation. If these are not available, assist your client to access food vouchers from other mainstream emergency relief agencies.
- aim to ascertain the reason for running out of money for food and organise a session with a financial counsellor, if appropriate.
- schools may need to consider a breakfast and/or lunch program.

Resources

Food security client information is available on the Good Food for New Arrivals website www.asetts.org.au/nutrition/

This includes a “Money for Food” booklet, available in a variety of languages

Reference

Still there’s no food! Food insecurity in a refugee population in Perth, Western Australia Gallegos D, Ellies P and Wright J (2008) *Nutrition and Dietetics* **65** 78-83