

# The Deep Connection Between Food, Nutrition and Children's Health



## Background

At Connecticut Children's, more than half of our hospital patients, and nearly three-quarters of the families who bring their children to our primary care clinics, rely on Medicaid. The health disparities that many of these families face are often exacerbated by inequities in access to healthy and nutritious foods. People are said to face food insecurity when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food to meet their basic needs for an active healthy life. Food insecurity is considered a Health-Related Social Need meaning it represents an unmet social or economic need that can impact a person's health and wellbeing.

## Is Food Insecurity Common?

According to [Data Haven](#), food insecurity in Connecticut is at a record high.

- 1 in 6 children statewide are food insecure.
- Non-white families experience food insecurity at higher rates than white families.
- 1 in 4 Black and Latino families in Connecticut are food insecure.

## How Do We Know if A Household Is Experiencing Food Insecurity?

In the medical setting, the most common screening tool for food insecurity is called Hunger Vital Sign™. Using this tool, providers can identify a patient family being at risk for food insecurity if they answer that either or both of the following two statements is 'often true' or 'sometimes true' (vs. 'never true'):

- *Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.*
- *Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more.*

At Connecticut Children's we have a universal food insecurity screening procedure as part of our Emergency Department registration process, and we screen patients in our primary care clinics, using Hunger Vital Sign.

### 7.2 million

Children in the US lack reliable access to enough food to live active, healthy lives

Source: [US Department of Agriculture \(2023\)](#)

### Nearly one quarter

In 2022, 23% of Connecticut families with children experienced food insecurity

Source: [DataHaven](#)

### Increased risk

Relative to children in food sufficient households, children who experience mild food insecurity 13.7% more likely to experience chronic pain. Food insecurity is associated with increased rates of recurrent respiratory infections, obesity, depression, sleep disturbance and greater healthcare utilization.

Source: [National Library of Medicine](#)

## How Is a Child's Health and Wellbeing Impacted by Food Insecurity?

- Food insecurity can have negative physical health impacts on children, including malnutrition, poor growth, predisposition to chronic diet-related diseases, asthma, poor oral health, headaches, fatigue, and increased need for emergency care services.
- Food insecurity can have negative mental health impacts on children, including increased rates of depression, anxiety, and mood disorders.
- Food insecurity can have negative developmental impacts on children, including developmental delays and learning and school problems.

In a June 2025 letter to Congressional leadership, Governor Ned Lamont and 22 state governors noted that SNAP “is one of the most powerful tools states have to address hunger, improve overall health, and help people overcome poverty. In 2024, SNAP provided food benefits to more than 42 million people in the United States, helping to address the needs of more than 13% of households across the country who experienced food insecurity.”



## What Resources Can Help Families Be More Food Secure?

### *In the community*

- [Food banks](#) and [pantries](#) provide free groceries to families
- Government assistance programs, including SNAP, WIC, and school meals programs, CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program)
- Many community and faith-based organizations provide a range of support including weekly food distributions, meal delivery, community dinners and emergency financial aid for food purchases.
- 211.org is a helpful resource for identifying sources of food assistance

### *At Connecticut Children's*

- Start Childhood Off Right, a program of our Office for Community Child Health, operates a produce voucher program that supports access to healthy foods for patient families who screen positive for food insecurity in our primary care clinics and hospital emergency department.
- For patients who screen positive for food insecurity, we provide produce vouchers that can be redeemed at four grocery locations in Hartford or virtual vouchers that can be redeemed at national chains (e.g., Walmart, Stop and Shop, etc) across the state.
- Results: So far, this effort has provided families with more than 3,000 vouchers that covered \$60,000 worth of fresh fruits and vegetables.

### *Public policy changes that can support food security*

- Include in Medicaid benefits coverage for health-related social needs
- Integrate “food is medicine” interventions such as produce vouchers or medically tailored meals into health care
- Strengthen public funding for food systems and government assistance programs like SNAP