

BRIEFING NOTE

Food insecurity among people living with HIV in British Columbia

The Issue

People are food insecure when they do not have access to sufficient, nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and supports an active and healthy life.¹ It has many economic, social and health consequences, particularly for people living with HIV. People living with HIV who are food insecure, find it harder to manage their illness and maintain their health.

Among people living with HIV, food insecurity is associated with:¹⁻⁹

- Lower incomes
- Unstable housing
- History of substance use
- Depressive symptoms
- Adverse treatment outcomes
- Increases in diagnoses of comorbid conditions
- Increases in mortality rates

It is therefore not surprising that food insecurity is a robust predictor of health service utilization for people living with HIV.¹⁰

In 2011, approximately 11,700 people were living with HIV in British Columbia.¹¹ While prevalence of food insecurity in the general British Columbia population is estimated to be 8%, our study of adults living with HIV in BC showed a prevalence of 72%.

Our Study

A national team of AIDS service organizations and academic researchers came together to understand the impact of food insecurity on the health and well-being of people living with HIV in Ontario, Quebec and BC.

In BC, a total of 329 HIV-positive adults were recruited primarily from community-based organizations – places where people who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poverty seek care and support. Among participants, 72% were food insecure. These individuals were:

- Three times more likely to report significant substance use
- Six times more likely to have difficulty meeting housing expenses
- Six times more likely to have been living on an income of less than \$20,000
- Two times more likely to use outreach services
- Three times more likely to have a history of alcohol and drug use

In addition, 89% of participants reported resorting to stealing, sex work and dumpster diving to feed themselves.

Participants who were food secure on the other hand:

- Were five times more likely to take their HIV medications as prescribed
- Experienced 78% stronger immune function
- Scored 21% higher on measures of mental health
- Were almost three times less likely to report being depressed

Data from a 24-hour dietary recall showed the poor quality and diversity of foods being consumed by people who were food insecure (i.e. less protein, fruit and vegetables).¹² Although caloric intake did not vary significantly between people who were food secure compared to those who were food insecure, nutrient intake did, indicating that while sufficient quantities of food may be available, it is often of poor nutrient value.¹²

Key Considerations

In the absence of a comprehensive food security strategy, many people who are food insecure rely on food banks and community programs which often do not allow people to meet their basic needs.

Food is a strong determinant of wellness – if we want people living with HIV to thrive and be retained in care, we need to make sure they have access to safe, secure and nutritious food.

Recommendations

To increase the health and wellness of people living with HIV, and subsequently reduce any burden that further health complications place on the health care system, we call on the Government of British Columbia to:

1. Make food security a foundational issue in *From Hope to Health: Towards an AIDS-Free Generation* and all future HIV-related strategies and policies and require all health authorities to implement strategies to address food insecurity.
2. Make funding food security programs and services an essential aspect of provincial STOP HIV/AIDS funding.
3. Work with policymakers, industry, community-based organizations and consumer groups to develop a provincial strategy to ensure all British Columbians living with HIV receive adequate and nutritious food.
4. The work to help curb food insecurity at the frontlines is critical. Incorporate food support outreach services with sexual health and harm reduction programs to optimize access to adequate and nutritious food for people living with HIV. It is a fundamental right that anyone accessing HIV prevention or care services should have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food.

To Learn More:

www.foodsecuritystudy.ca

<http://pacificaidnetwork.org/news/new-resources-from-the-food-security-study-team-in-bc/>

<http://pacificaidnetwork.org/programs-projects/community-based-research/cbr-pan/food-security-study/>

Or contact:

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Reference List

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