

Food Insecurity Among Nursing Students: What Can Be Done?

Kailey Rinaldi, PhD, APRN, CPNP-PC, CNE & Karen Aul, PhD, RN, CNE, CHSE



Food insecurity is defined as “a condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024). Food insecurity in nursing students has been reported to be higher than both the college student population and the general U.S. population (Bydalek et al., 2020; Cockerham et al., 2021). Reasons for higher rates of food insecurity may be related to demanding schedules including didactic, lab, clinical, and simulation requirements. Many students must also work additional hours to pay for their education and living expenses.

Without access to food, student success in the academic and clinical learning environments is threatened. Students reporting food insecurity are more likely to have lower GPAs and poorer health status (Abbey et al., 2022). Food insecurity can negatively affect students’ clinical performance and safety. Students who are engaging in clinical shifts without eating or who are only eating minimal amounts may experience tiredness, dizziness, weakness, or fainting. They are at risk for making errors that could jeopardize patient safety.

A recent survey of prelicensure nursing students from four Florida universities (one private and three public) was conducted to identify the prevalence of food insecurity. More than 37% of students reported that they ate less than they felt they should because there wasn’t enough money for food in the last year. Students reported that lack of money, the cost of food, and lack of time were contributing factors to food insecurity. Even with the number of students reporting food insecurity, many responded that they were unaware of resources available.

With the prevalence of food insecurity reported among nursing students, it is critical to provide resources and mitigate barriers to accessing food. Nursing programs could implement initiatives such as on-campus food pantries, emergency scholarship

applications, and provide students with nutritional education, as well as information on community resources. Even with food pantries on campuses, it’s important to evaluate the location and the hours they are open. With students’ demanding schedules, it’s critical to ensure that they have time to access the pantry, and it is in a convenient location. Some campuses offer an ordering system where students can place an online order for groceries and then pick them up outside of the pantry’s normal operating hours.

How can practicing nurses, clinical faculty, and clinical partners contribute, given that nursing students complete their clinical training in health care settings? Recommendations for addressing this issue at clinical sites include:

1. Fostering open communication between nursing preceptors, clinical faculty, and nursing programs to ensure students have designated time for meals.
2. Engaging with students when working closely with a designated nurse. Preceptors can check in on student well-being. A simple check in after lunch to make sure the student ate and is ready to resume patient care might be beneficial. Any concerns regarding the student should be relayed to the clinical instructor on site.
3. Helping students access resources that may benefit them including, but not limited to, local and community-based food pantries.
4. Supporting efforts of nursing organizations who coordinate food drive donations to on-campus food pantries.

Unfortunately, food insecurity among prelicensure nursing students is a recognized issue. Ensuring that students’ basic needs are met is vital to their academic success. Addressing this problem is critical, as it can negatively impact their future careers in nursing and our future workforce. A collaborative effort from practicing nurses, faculty, and clinical partners is necessary to decrease food insecurity among nursing students. ■

References online:
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