

When SNAP benefits run out, ‘people can die,’ say health experts

Even temporary food insecurity poses real risks, particularly for people with chronic disease

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Millions of Americans are set to lose access to food benefits starting Saturday because of the government shutdown, with at least 25 states telling recipients they won't receive checks for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in November. Health care experts warn that families will be forced to go hungry or make impossible choices between groceries and other basic needs like rent and medication, with potentially dire consequences.

“People can die” from even short gaps in nutrition and food access, said Lindsay Allen, a health economist at Northwestern University. She notes that people with diet-sensitive chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and chronic kidney disease rely on SNAP to buy nutritious food that helps them manage their conditions. Diabetes rates, for example, are higher among lower-income Americans, affecting 13% of people who live below the federal poverty level.

Without those funds, people may skip meals or opt for cheaper ultra-processed foods, which tend to be lower in nutritional value and higher in ingredients like sodium and sugar, according to Colleen Heflin, a professor of public administration and international affairs at Syracuse University. Either option could have immediate impacts on their health.

Research also suggests older Americans who receive SNAP are less likely to skip medications, presumably because they have more money to go toward copays.

“People are going to go hungry very quickly,” said Allen. “And then their health is going to deteriorate.” Even if they're cut off from benefits only temporarily, she said, they may get evicted or have their power shut off or skip medications in the meantime. “So what kind of compounding effect does that have?”

“Food insecurity in and of itself is a health risk,” she added. “As soon as SNAP benefits stop, you see immediate declines in dietary quality and in ongoing nutritional stability.”

Why is SNAP running out of money?

SNAP distributes an average of \$187 a month per person to nearly 42 million Americans. The Department of Agriculture, which administers SNAP, issued a memo on Friday saying it would not tap into the emergency funds that could cover two-thirds of next month's \$8 billion in benefits because they're reserved for contingencies like

natural disasters. A banner currently on the USDA website blames Democrats for the SNAP funding cliff, saying that they can “continue to hold out for healthcare for illegal aliens and gender mutilation procedures or reopen the government so mothers, babies, and the most vulnerable among us can receive critical nutrition assistance.”

Senate Democrats, however, say they’re holding the line in order to preserve the Affordable Care Act subsidies that, if allowed to lapse, would increase average insurance premiums by 75%. “We’re people who want Americans to have health care and food,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) told Politico last week. “The Republicans, evidently, don’t care whether they have either.”

Without SNAP, Americans may turn to alternatives like food banks. “But unfortunately that system is just not enough to cover the loss of SNAP, not least because food banks also saw their own federal funding reduced earlier this year” by \$500 million, Erica Kenney, associate professor of public health nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, said via email.

“We need to remember that SNAP is the safety net,” Allen said. “Below the safety net is concrete.”

How food insecurity and hunger impact mental health

While people with chronic diseases are especially vulnerable to the short-term consequences of food insecurity, research suggests there are a number of other ways that Americans’ health may suffer from even a temporary gap in food. SNAP benefits are paid out on the first of the month, and one study found that older adults’ visits to the emergency room go up later in the month, after benefits have run out — perhaps because food insecurity has an outsized impact on people whose overall health is already more fragile.

Research also shows that food insecurity is bad for mental health, and that low-income people have lower rates of psychological distress after they start receiving SNAP benefits. Conversely, losing SNAP benefits will increase levels of depression, anxiety, and stress in both parents and kids, Allen said.

“Eating is so fundamental to our survival as human beings, so not being able to consistently access the food you need is a really overwhelmingly stressful experience,” said Kenney, “and that is worse in situations where someone is caring for children as well — which itself is associated with poorer cardiovascular health.”

There’s also evidence that children’s academic test scores decline toward the end of the month as families run out of SNAP benefits. Food insecurity is “disruptive enough to children to impact behavior and cognition in school, which can have a whole set of longer term impacts as well,” Kenney said.

The disconnect between MAHA and food insecurity

It's not lost on health experts that like existing cuts to the SNAP program and to food banks, the SNAP cliff coincides with the rise of health secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s Make America Healthy Again movement. Improving Americans' diets is a cornerstone of Kennedy's pledge to lower rates of chronic disease in the U.S.

"There certainly seems to be a disconnect" between MAHA's goals and policies that are "pushing more people further away from being able to access healthful food," said Kenney.

Allen went further, noting that while MAHA focuses on issues like phasing out food dyes, "they're completely ignoring the people whose literal survival depends on programs like SNAP and Medicaid."

"We have completely lost sight of whose health actually needs protecting," she said, adding: "I wish that everyone had enough food on their table, that food dye was the only thing standing between them and health."