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Food Insecurity and Its Impact on Health Status Among Homeless Individuals: An Integrative Literature Review

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Background

Food insecurity is a serious problem in the United States. The number of people affected by food insecurity in the United States has risen dramatically in recent years. 39 million people per year experience food insecurity according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). There are an estimated 12.7% of homes in the United States that experience food insecurity, representing 15.8 million households nationwide. Of those impacted by food insecurity, the homeless population is disproportionately afflicted.

Significance

The combination of homelessness and food insecurity is a problem that is costly to the overall health of the population. Morbidity that results from food insecurity imposes serious financial burden on the State and undermines the United States public health. As nurses, we will encounter these populations and treat them in both community and acute care settings. We must be aware that food insecure persons are a real threat to certain populations and could be responsible for the most immediate complaint. A stronger understanding of their experience of food insecurity and their ongoing nutritional status would be helpful in identifying appropriate nursing interventions and priorities.

Purpose

The purpose of this integrative literature review is to analyze the influence the food insecurity has over the health of homeless persons. In view of that, it is important to consider the difficulties homeless individuals have in obtaining healthy and sufficient food, how particularly their diet impacts the state of health and whether they have an access to timely care. Further, how food insecurity interrelates with other vulnerabilities and how it impacts the course of certain types of diseases.

Research Questions

1. What challenges and obstacles are experienced by homeless individuals in regards to getting healthy and sufficient amount of food?
2. How their food insecurity impacts on health status and health outcomes?

Theoretical Framework

The Ecosocial Theory is integrating numerous social factors for analysis. It is of great use to the purpose of this study because it requires an explicit consideration of many factors which influence the interrelated problems of food instability and homelessness. Ecosocial theory types and levels of exposure to a problem, its historical context, as well as public health, political, economic and sociological background.

Methods

Research Design

This study examined the level of food insecurity and inadequate nutritional status among domestic homeless population and examine how it impacts the health outcomes of the population utilizing an integrative literature review.

Data Search Strategies and Evaluation

The main criteria for inclusion of scientific articles in this study was its language and publication date. Thus, peer reviewed journal articles in English published between 1997 and 2017 (but preferably published as late as possible) were used as data sources.

The search strategies included reviews of the following databases: Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL) Complete, PubMed, SAGE, and ProQuest Nursing & Allied Health Source. The key words were various combinations that included “food insecurity”, “homelessness”, “health”, “nutritional status”, “nutrition”, “poverty”, “healthcare”, “health outcomes”, “barriers”, “public health”, and “United States.” Particular author’s names were also used for the search for articles on similar topics. The articles were then analyzed and themes were determined to address each of two research questions. The major common themes that emerged were food insecurity and health, homelessness and access to health care, food insecurity and nutritional status, homelessness/food insecurity and health outcomes or adherence.

Results

Of the seven articles studied, two obstacles were identified. Those concern financial issues and insecure housing resources that include inaccessibility of proper kitchen facilities, and tendency to postpone treatment and negative perception of health care system by homeless persons.

Pursuant to the studied literature, the difficulties faced by homeless persons in acquiring sufficient amount of healthy food include lack of money to buy victuals and the inaccessibility of proper facilities for cooking and storage of food. Therefore, these persons mostly consume junk food, which is easier to get and store.

Compounded with poor access to preventative and outpatient care and high rates of emergency rooms usage were found among individuals with housing instability. Food insufficient homeless persons may postpone treatment at earlier stages of illness until the need is acute, which results in increased usage of crisis-oriented medical facilities.

Nursing Implications

The reviewed studies showed that homeless persons require special care and it is therefore important for nurses to understand the relevant background of these individuals to better identify risk factors and provide more timely diagnostics of existing diseases and their causes and provide appropriate resources.

Conclusion

The problem of food insecurity is a widespread and dangerous issue that entails high levels of illnesses, comorbidity, and mortality. It affects the social wellness of the population in general and therefore requires further studies aimed at reducing of this problem and its consequences.

Food insecurity also implies numerous health complications for those who suffer from it. Homeless individuals experience numerous challenges and obstacles as regards getting healthy and sufficient amount of food, and this entails further health issues. As a result, homeless persons use emergency care more often than preventive medical care, and their serious and chronic diseases are more difficult to manage and treat.