



Healthy Eating: Government-wide solutions for promoting healthy diets, food safety, and food security

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Each year, millions of people in the U.S. die from diet-related chronic health conditions, get sick from foodborne illnesses, or go hungry. We have recommended a government-wide approach to addressing these widespread and often preventable food-related challenges.

The Big Picture

Mortality rates and hunger related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as recent incidents of food contamination, have underscored and exacerbated health risks related to food. The federal government has not developed strategies for addressing diet, food safety, or food security issues during emergencies. These issues include:

- **Higher COVID-19 mortality for people with diet-related chronic health conditions.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that people who reported having cardiovascular diseases or diabetes—two diet-related conditions—were 12 times more likely to die from a COVID-19 infection than people who did not report these conditions.
- **Food insecurity.** Food insecurity means difficulty purchasing food or finding nutritious food near home, school, or work. Pandemic-related disruptions in the food supply chain, from farms to grocery stores, have caused shortages of food and infant formula. Further, people have experienced financial stress in purchasing food, as well as limited access to meals at places such as schools and senior centers.
- **Infant formula contamination.** In February 2022, certain infant formulas were found to be contaminated with harmful bacteria. Multiple infants were hospitalized and at least two died from resulting foodborne illness. Subsequent formula recalls worsened the existing shortage.

Numerous federal agencies are responsible for ensuring people have access to nutritious and safe food. Because agencies' efforts are fragmented (dispersed), efforts need to be well coordinated.

Ineffective coordination can lead to overlapping and duplicative efforts, or it can limit agencies' ability to achieve desired results. Developing government-wide strategies to strengthen coordination could help manage fragmentation and associated challenges.

What GAO's Work Shows

As of July 2022, many of our recommendations for developing strategies on healthy eating have not yet been addressed.

1. Strategy Needed to Address Diet-Related Chronic Health Conditions

Three diet-related chronic health conditions (cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancer) were among the 10 leading causes of death in 2018, according to CDC. Men, Black or African Americans, and people living in southern states had disproportionately higher mortality rates from diet-related conditions. Dietary changes could have prevented some of these deaths.

Additionally, in 2018, about three in four adults in the U.S. had excess weight, which can be associated with poor diet and lead to cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancer.



Source: GAO analysis of 2018 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. | GAO-22-106078

We identified 200 diet-related efforts that officials from across 21 federal agencies consider important for reducing the risk of chronic health conditions.

Federal Efforts to Address Diet-Related Chronic Conditions

Category	Examples of activities
Research	Collect or monitor data, conduct or fund studies, develop healthy eating guidelines
Education and clinical services	Inform program beneficiaries and the public, counsel patients
Food assistance and access	Provide food or assistance in purchasing food, improve community access to food
Regulatory action	Issue requirements or recommendations for food producers, manufacturers, and retailers

Source: GAO analysis of agency information. | GAO-22-106078

Federal agencies have not effectively coordinated these numerous diet-related efforts, which has limited their ability to achieve desired outcomes. For example, federal agencies have not fully addressed important gaps in scientific knowledge, including on healthy diets for infants and children.

➤ **We recommended** in 2021 that Congress consider identifying and directing a federal entity to lead a strategy on diet-related efforts.

2. Strategy Needed to Improve Federal Oversight of Food Safety

The safety and quality of the food supply are governed by a highly complex system stemming from at least 30 federal laws administered by 15 agencies.

We have long reported on the fragmented federal food safety oversight system. We added federal oversight of food safety to our high-risk list in 2007; federal government operations on this list either need broad reform or are vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. We added this issue to the list because of inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources.

For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had critical information on contaminated eggs that ultimately sickened more than 1,900 people in 2010. Because of the divided regulatory environment, USDA did not share this information with agencies that had the authority and ability to act on it. If the agencies had received this information,

they could have limited the scope of the ensuing recall of more than 500 million eggs by targeting those that were more likely to be contaminated, according to USDA’s Office of Inspector General.

➤ **We recommended** in 2017 that the Executive Office of the President develop a strategy for federal food safety oversight.

3. Strategy Needed to Respond to Food Insecurity in Emergencies

The pandemic has disproportionately impacted certain groups of people, especially people of color, and exacerbated long-standing structural issues that have affected these groups’ access to food.

USDA had pandemic response plans in place for several nutrition assistance programs prior to the pandemic; however, these plans were outdated and did not always provide actionable guidance for states. Similarly, USDA missed opportunities to coordinate with states and private vendors. We also found that USDA has not incorporated some key lessons learned from the pandemic, such as the need to intentionally address racial and ethnic inequalities during pandemic recovery and future reforms.

➤ **We recommended** in 2022 that USDA develop a strategy for nutrition assistance programs to respond to emergencies.

Challenges and Opportunities

Healthy eating is a broad and multi-faceted area involving the need to modify a variety of complex human behaviors. It is further complicated by the need for action from a large number of federal agencies, without whose participation, meaningful progress is unlikely.

More from GAO’s Portfolio

- Diet-related chronic health conditions: [GAO-21-593](#)
- Food safety: [GAO-17-74](#), [GAO-15-180](#), [GAO-11-289](#)
- Food insecurity in emergencies: [GAO-22-105291](#), [GAO-22-105051](#), [GAO-21-551](#), [GAO-21-387](#)

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Contact Us

For more information about this Snapshot, contact: Steve Morris, Director, Natural Resources and Environment, MorrisS@gao.gov, (202) 512-3841

A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, Congressional Relations, ClowersA@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400

Chuck Young, Managing Director, Public Affairs, YoungC1@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800

Contributors: Tara Congdon, Anne Johnson, Chloe Kay, Kelsey Kennedy, Sulayman Njie, Cynthia Norris, Monica Scott, and Dan Royer

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