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Households with special dietary needs experienced higher food access challenges and worries during COVID-19

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Purpose: Information on the association between special dietary needs and food insecurity, food-related challenges and food worries during the pandemic is scarce.

Methods: We used the National Food Access and COVID-19 Research Team (NFACT) survey from New Mexico with data collected from 21 May until 25 June 2020. Households were classified as having special dietary needs if they reported any dietary restriction. Multivariable-adjusted logistic regressions



were performed on nine individual dichotomous challenge statements and on food insecurity measured using the USDA 6-item measure. Multivariable-adjusted ordinal regressions were performed on five individual worry statements which were measured on a 6-point Likert scale.

Results: Overall 53.1% of 1019 households reported having special dietary needs. Of these 49.4%, 49.0% and 18.9% required special diets due to allergies, health conditions, and vegetarianism, respectively. Compared to those without special dietary needs, food insecurity (OR=1.93 [1.22,3.29]), food-related challenges (OR_{affordability}=1.55 [1.16,1.96], OR_{availability}=1.82 [1.34,2.46], OR_{preference}=2.05 [1.45,2.90], OR_{location}=1.89 [1.38,2.59], OR_{knowing where to get food}= 2.70 [1.85,3.93], and OR_{pantry}=2.62[1.47,4.68]) and worries (OR_{prices}=1.86 [1.47,2.36], OR_{safety}=1.97 [1.56,2.48], OR_{home stocks}=1.98 [1.56,2.52], OR_{store supplies}=1.73 [1.38,2.17], and OR_{losing income}=2.17 [1.68,2.82]) were higher among households with special dietary needs. Stratified analysis showed similar results for allergy and health diet restrictions, but not among vegetarians.

Discussion: Households with special dietary needs, particularly those with health conditions and food allergies, are at increased risk of food-related concerns during public health emergencies, and therefore require more attention in such events.