

Most Home-Delivered Meal Recipients with Dementia Receive Support from Friends and Family, but More Social Activity is Needed

Claire Pendergrast

The Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program funds home-delivered meals for adults ages 60 and over to reduce hunger and food insecurity, promote socialization, and improve health and wellbeing.¹ Over 880,000 older adults received home-delivered meals in 2019,² approximately 13% of whom have a dementia diagnosis. For many home-delivered meal recipients, these daily meal deliveries are critical for meeting basic food needs and enabling older adults to remain in their homes as they age.³

Research shows that home-delivered meals reduce risk of nursing home admission and emergency department visits for older adults.^{4,5} Home delivered meals have also been shown to reduce loneliness among meal recipients.⁶ The socialization and “safety check” provided by meal delivery drivers’ daily interactions with meal recipients may be important components of home-delivered meals’ beneficial health effects,⁷ as drivers often form meaningful relationships with meal recipients and provide additional social and direct supports beyond meal delivery.⁸ The social benefits of home-delivered meal services may be especially important for meal recipients with dementia, as social interactions are known to slow cognitive decline⁹ and social engagement often declines after a dementia diagnosis.¹⁰

Understanding the social support needs and benefits of services for home-delivered meal recipients with dementia should inform policy and program efforts to bolster health and social inclusion for older adults with dementia. This brief uses nationally representative data from 2019 to examine home-delivered meal recipients’ social activity and perceived social benefits of meal delivery services. I compare outcomes (e.g., living alone, feeling alone, desiring more social activity) for meal recipients with and without a dementia diagnosis.

KEY FINDINGS

- Home-delivered meal recipients with dementia are more likely to live with others, receive daily social contact besides interactions with meal delivery drivers, and receive help from friends and family to remain in the home and coordinate services.
- 83% of home delivered meal recipients with dementia report wanting more social activity, compared to 68% of meal recipients without dementia.
- Aging services providers should assess social support networks for home-delivered meal recipients, offer resources to support informal caregivers for older adults, and consider social programming options to increase social opportunities for meal recipients with dementia.

Daily Social Contact and Support from Friends and Family is More Common for Home-Delivered Meal Recipients with Dementia

Many older adults with dementia require significant support with daily activities in order to live safely at home, and unpaid family members provide most of the care for people with dementia, even when older adults with dementia receive paid long-term care or supportive services like home-delivered meals.¹¹ Figure 1 shows differences in rates of four specific social outcomes (living alone; receiving daily social contact besides home meal delivery; receiving help coordinating services from friends or family; and receiving assistance from friends or family that helps them remain at home) between home-delivered meal recipients ages 60 and older with and without a dementia diagnosis. Home-delivered meal recipients with dementia are less likely to live alone compared to those without dementia (46% versus 61%) and are more likely to receive daily social contacts other than with meal delivery drivers compared to those without dementia (73% versus 43%). Meal recipients with dementia are also nearly twice as likely to report that family and friends help with coordinating services compared to meal recipients without dementia (74% versus 40%) and are more likely to report that family and friends provide assistance that helps them stay at home compared to those without dementia (83% versus 65%).

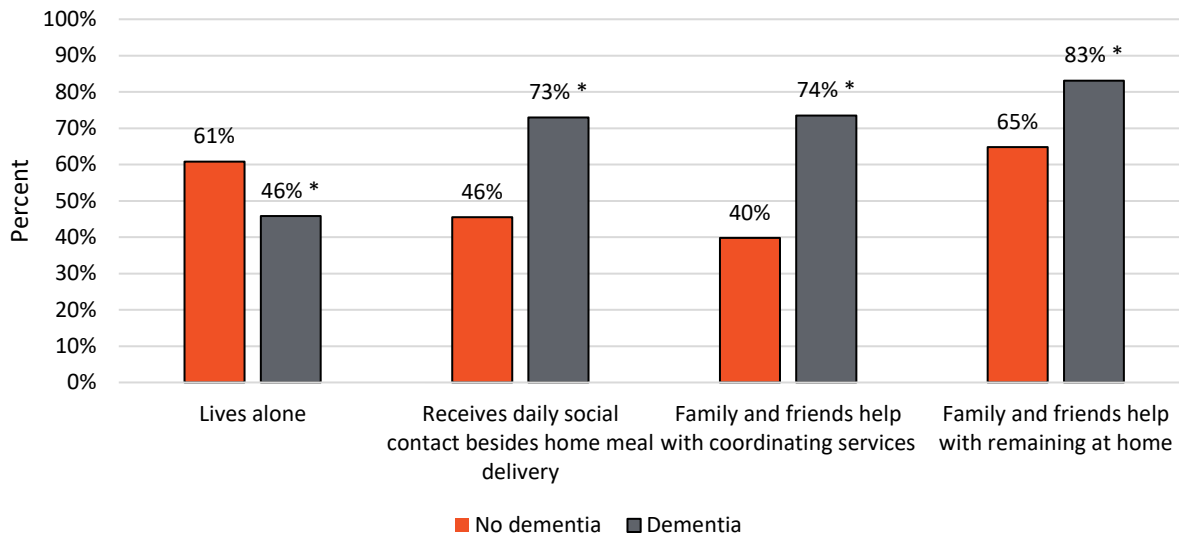


Figure 1. Informal Social Supports among Home Delivered Meal Recipients by Dementia Status, 2019

Data Source: 2019 National Survey of Older American Act Participants, Home-Delivered Meal Module, N=776. Respondents are a nationally representative sample of adults ages 60+ receiving home-delivered meals.

Note: *Indicates statistically significant difference between home-delivered meal recipients with versus without dementia ($p < 0.05$)

Most Home-Delivered Meals Recipients with Dementia Would Like More Social Activity, and Meal Services Increase Feelings of Safety but not Social Opportunity

Figure 2 shows differences in rates of four specific social outcomes (desire for more social activity, feeling alone, having more social opportunities because of home-delivered meal services, and feeling safer at home because of daily home-delivered meal visits) between home-delivered meal recipients ages 60 and older with and without a dementia diagnosis. Most (83%) home-delivered meal recipients with dementia

report that they would like to be doing more social activity, compared to 68% of those without dementia. However, meal recipients with and without dementia differed little in reports of social isolation or “feeling alone” (56% with dementia and 51% without dementia.) Few meal recipients reported that receiving home-delivered meal services increased their social opportunities (19% with dementia versus 25% without dementia), while most meal recipients, regardless of dementia status, reported feeling safer at home because of regular visits from meal delivery drivers (87% with dementia versus 86% without dementia).

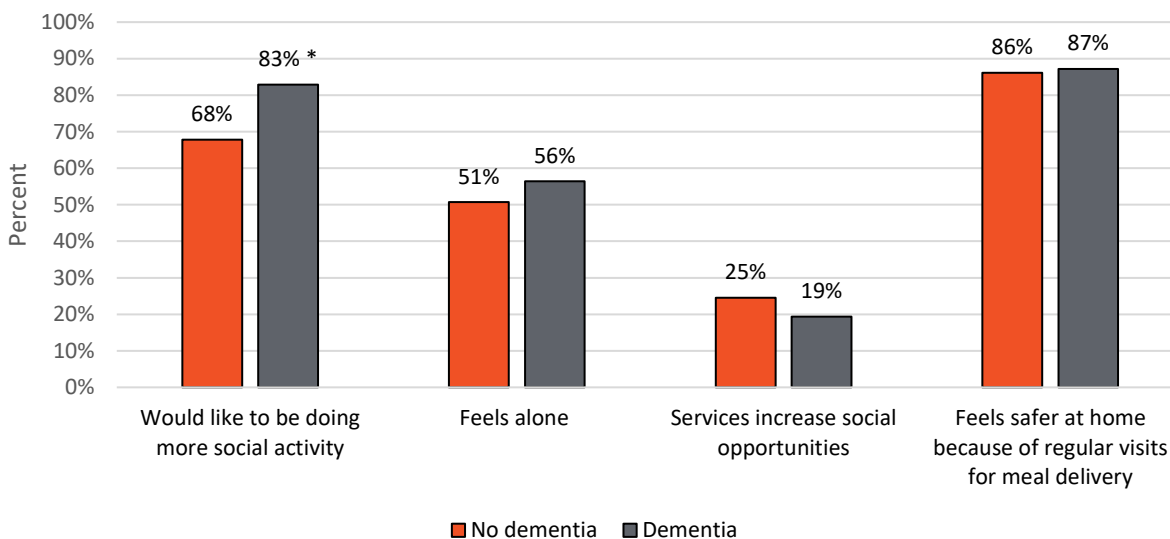


Figure 2. Social Wellbeing and Social Benefits of Services for Home Delivered Meal Recipients, 2019

Data Source: 2019 National Survey of Older American Act Participants, Home-Delivered Meal Module, N=776. Respondents are a nationally representative sample of adults ages 60+ receiving home-delivered meals. *Note:* *Indicates statistically significant difference between home-delivered meal recipients with and without dementia (p<0.05)

Both Informal Support and Formal Services are Beneficial for Older Adults with Dementia, but More Social Opportunities are Needed

Most home-delivered meal recipients with dementia receive significant social support from friends and family, although the vast majority also report desiring greater social activity. These findings suggest that many older adults with dementia benefit from diverse sources of social support, including formal services like home-delivered meals and informal care, and help arranging services from friends and family members. While home-delivered meals are highly effective at increasing older adults’ sense of safety through daily “safety checks” by meal delivery drivers, aging services providers should consider strategies to increase social opportunities for home-delivered meal recipients, especially those with dementia for whom social engagement is key to slowing cognitive decline.⁹

Aging services providers should assess the social support systems of home-delivered meal clients to connect family caregivers with additional supports as needed, and to identify if older adults with dementia are without informal supports and may benefit from more robust formal supports beyond meal deliveries. Service providers should also make a concerted effort to identify the small share of home-delivered meal clients with dementia who do not receive daily social contact besides their meal delivery

driver or whose family and friends don't help them remain at home, as these individuals may be at high risk of isolation and health decline. This priority group may grow as the population ages in coming decades, and a growing number of older adults with dementia will have less access to unpaid family care and may increasingly depend on formal services like home-delivered meals to remain healthy and socially connected in their communities.¹¹

Expanding social programs for home-delivered meal recipients would offer social benefits to older adults and reduce strain on unpaid caregivers for older adults with dementia whose social support and care needs can be intensive and stressful for family and friends. Aging services providers looking to initiate or strengthen social programming may benefit from consulting the engAGED National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults, a recent federal program which aims to reduce older adults' social isolation by building capacity among aging services providers nationwide to support social engagement.¹² Service providers can use resources from engAGED to identify program options (including dementia-specific and virtual social programs) that fit meal recipients' support needs and organizational capacity, ultimately strengthening social supports and improving health and wellbeing for the older adults they serve.

Data and Methods

Data were retrieved from the Administration for Community Living's AGID Program Data Portal (<https://agid.acl.gov/datafiles/NPS/>). I conducted analyses using data from the 2019 National Survey of Older Americans Act Participants (NSOAAP) home-delivered meal module. Dementia status was assessed through the question "Has a doctor ever told you that you have memory-related disease such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia?"

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