



story

Nutrition: What Is Malnutrition?

Did you know one of the world's most serious health problems is malnutrition? More children die from poor nutrition than from any infectious disease.

Contrary to popular belief, the biggest malnutrition problem is not in Africa, but in South Asia, where half of all children are undernourished. But serious malnutrition exists in countries in every region of the world, from Indonesia, to Uzbekistan, Yemen, Guatemala and Peru.

Meera Shekar, a World Bank nutrition specialist, says about 30% of the world's children are undernourished. Some 60% of children who die of common diseases like malaria and diarrhea would not have died if they had not been malnourished in the first place, she says.

Small Window of Opportunity

Shekar says good nutrition is especially important for children under two. Children who do not get good enough nutrition in their first two years are affected for life. They do not grow properly and have more health problems than children who had enough nutrients when they were young. Children who were malnourished as babies are also more susceptible to disease.

"There is actually a very, very tight window of opportunity, which is between conception through the first two years of life," Shekar says. "If we miss this window, we miss a whole generation."

"Many people assume that feeding children later in life will improve nutrition. Well, it's too little, too expensive and too late to improve nutrition or to improve future productivity."

Not Just a Problem for the Poor

Malnutrition is not only a problem for the world's poorest countries. Many children in many countries are under-nourished even in places where food is plentiful, says Shekar.

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Not Just a Problem for the Poor (continued)

The number of underweight children can range from as low as 2–10% of the population to as high as 40–70%. In India, 26% of children in the wealthiest families are underweight and 65% are anemic, Shekar says.

“Anemic children perform less well in school, are more likely to drop out and have lower intellectual and physical productivity as adults. Everyone talks about how well India is doing in the IT industry—imagine how much better it could do, if 65% of the richest and 88% of the poorest children were not anemic!”

Need for a Re-Think

When large numbers of children suffer malnutrition, their entire country suffers. Poverty causes malnutrition, and malnutrition, in turn, causes poverty.

Shekar says it’s time to recognize how important nutrition is to the overall well-being of a country. Improving nutrition could double the economic growth rate of poor countries, she says.

Nutrition “is something that can drive economic growth rather than riding on the coat-tails of economic growth, because children who are well-nourished have been shown to have much higher income potential as adults,” she says.

What Is Malnutrition?

Malnutrition occurs when your body doesn’t get the right amount of nutrients. Someone is under-nourished if they don’t get enough nutrients, and over-nourished if they get too many.

Many developing countries have both problems. Some children are under-nourished from lack of food. Others are over-nourished from overeating and not enough exercise.

Over-nourished children can become overweight, even obese, and more easily get non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancer. You are overweight if your body mass index (BMI) is 25 or more, and obese if your BMI is 30 or more. BMI measures the difference between height and weight to estimate the amount of body fat.

IT'S A FACT

What is my Body Mass Index (BMI)?

Check your BMI using an **on-line BMI calculator** (such as the one found at www.kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/dieting/weight_height.html). It’s important to check that you are at a healthy weight when you are growing!

Today, obesity is becoming as big a problem as starvation. Globally, there are more than 1 billion overweight adults—and at least 300 million of them are obese.

People are becoming obese from eating more energy-dense foods high in saturated fats and sugars, and from getting less exercise.

To reduce obesity-related diseases, communities need to encourage, motivate and enable people to lose weight.