



What is malnutrition?

Online Q&A

8 July 2016

Malnutrition refers to deficiencies, excesses or imbalances in a person's intake of energy and/or nutrients. The term malnutrition covers 2 broad groups of conditions. One is 'undernutrition'—which includes stunting (low height for age), wasting (low weight for height), underweight (low weight for age) and micronutrient deficiencies or insufficiencies (a lack of important vitamins and minerals). The other is overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases (such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer).



At a health centre in South Sudan a health workers helps a mother weigh her child to check on the child's nutrition levels.

WHO/G. Novelo

What are the consequences of malnutrition?

Malnutrition affects people in every country. Around 1.9 billion adults worldwide are overweight, while 462 million are underweight. An estimated 41 million children under the age of 5 years are overweight or obese, while some 159 million are stunted and 50 million are wasted. Adding to this burden are the 528 million or 29% of women of reproductive age around the world affected by anaemia, for which approximately half would be amenable to iron supplementation.

Many families cannot afford or access enough nutritious foods like fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes, meat and milk, while foods and drinks

high in fat, sugar and salt are cheaper and more readily available, leading to a rapid rise in the number of children and adults who are overweight and obese, in poor as well as rich countries. It is quite common to find undernutrition and overweight within the same community, household or even individual – it is possible to be both overweight and micronutrient deficient, for example.

What is being done to address malnutrition?

In April 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition from 2016 to 2025. The Decade aims to catalyse policy commitments that result in measurable action to address all forms of malnutrition. The aim is to ensure all people have access to healthier and more sustainable diets to eradicate all forms of malnutrition worldwide.

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