

Nutrition at the World Food Programme

Preventing Chronic Malnutrition

The Many Faces of Stunting

Stunting, caused by chronic malnutrition, is a growth failure in a child over time, resulting in a youngster who is short for his or her age. But chronic malnutrition is not just about height. The less visible impacts of stunting are much more devastating. Chronic malnutrition also affects brain development, school performance, immunity and health. Stunted children are more likely to become ill and they have a higher risk of dying. They are more likely to drop out of school and grow up to be unskilled workers with less earning potential in later life. Adults who were stunted as children have an increased risk of nutrition-related chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, and coronary heart disease.

Stunting is largely invisible in many communities, but affects 165 million children worldwide, 90 percent of whom live in Africa and Asia. This makes it a problem of greater magnitude than underweight or wasting.

Short For Their Age

Mayan children from Guatemala, pictured top right, are shorter than the World Health Organization's global average for nine-year-olds. Mayan children raised in the United States, with better access to nutritious foods, health services and a clean environment, show appropriate growth for their age, and are, on average, six inches taller.



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New in January 2014

The 2013 Lancet series on Maternal and Child Nutrition highlighted that improving nutrition in pregnancy — and the pre-pregnancy period — plays a pivotal role in preventing stunting. Food support, particularly in the third trimester of

pregnancy, is a proven strategy to prevent stunting in food-insecure areas. At the Nutrition4Growth summit in London in June, WFP's Executive Director announced a new partnership with UNFPA and UNICEF focussing on pregnant and breastfeeding women as well as adolescent girls.



What Leads to Stunting

Stunting is a direct result of gaps in nutrient access and intake among children during the critical window of opportunity—from conception until two years of age— sometimes referred to as the first 1,000 days of life. Limited access to nutrients, inadequate breastfeeding as well as poor complementary feeding and care practices undermine child growth. Children who suffer from repeated infections and illness, especially diarrhoea, are unlikely to thrive or grow properly. The prevalence of stunting is a reflection of larger social and economic factors, including food insecurity, poverty, access to water and sanitation, and women's education.

The effects of stunting are intergenerational. If a woman's nutrient intake is inadequate during pregnancy and while breastfeeding, there is an increased risk that her baby will experience a nutrient gap and will not benefit from optimal growth.

In turn, mothers who are short in height also run a greater risk of birth complications due to a narrower pelvis, a factor associated with deaths among newborn babies and maternal mortality.

WFP's Role in Preventing Stunting

Stunting cannot be reversed or treated, only prevented during the critical window of opportunity during the first 1,000 days of life. WFP uses a comprehensive lifecycle approach to prevent stunting, focusing on children under two, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and adolescent girls. While working with partners who promote breastfeeding, care practices, water and sanitation, agricultural development, and health care services, WFP's main areas of focus include:



- Ensuring **adequate complementary feeding**, via the provision of specialized nutrient-dense foods as part of a strategy to improve local availability and access to nutritious foods.
- Promoting **nutrition-sensitive activities** that address the underlying causes of undernutrition across WFP's other programme areas, including general food distribution, school feeding, food-for-assets projects and Purchase for Progress (P4P).
- **Strengthening the capacity** of national governments to assess, identify, design, deliver, monitor, and evaluate policies across sectors, and programming that directly and indirectly prevent stunting.