Why is Nutrition Important?

Good nutrition, especially throughout the critical window of opportunity during the first 1,000 days of life, can make all the difference. Globally, malnutrition is the underlying cause of 45 percent of deaths among children aged under five every year. Ensuring access to nutritious foods, health services, and a supportive care environment is essential to prevent the irreversible damage childhood undernutrition can cause.

The Impact of Undernutrition

Malnutrition costs lives and robs futures. Globally, one in four children are stunted, meaning that they are not reaching their full physical and mental potential. Undernutrition can have a devastating impact at the individual level, but the economic costs at the national and global level are also staggering. The cost of undernutrition is estimated at 2–3 percent of global GDP, equivalent to US$1.4–2.1 trillion per year, and is much higher in the most affected countries. These values are sufficient to significantly undermine national development.

WFP Nutrition

WFP works to ensure that nutritionally vulnerable household members (for example pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, young children, adolescent girls, the chronically ill) can access the right food at the right time in the right way.

WFP supports governments to design and implement programme and policy solutions to nutrition issues, and directly reaches more than 10 million women and children with nutrition-specific interventions annually.

Nutrition cuts across all our work, and we make sure to provide nutritionally appropriate food to the people we serve. Our field presence gives us an advantage in tackling undernutrition as we can design and deliver tailored responses to meet specific nutrition needs in rapidly changing contexts, as well as in some of the most hard-to-reach places on earth.

WFP is an active participant and strong supporter of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, which has galvanized country-level commitment to reducing malnutrition, and co-convenes the SUN Business Network with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).
Our Work at a Glance
Nutrition programmes and approaches

Treatment of moderate acute malnutrition
Children with moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) are said to be “wasted” or dangerously thin. Annually, wasting affects 51 million children under five, and increases a child’s risk of death by up to eight times compared to a well-nourished child. WFP provides specialized nutritious food to treat MAM among children, pregnant and breastfeeding women and people living with HIV and TB, also referring them to necessary health services to help them recover quickly.

Preventing acute malnutrition
Sudden shocks and extended crises can increase acute malnutrition. While treatment is essential, preventing the malnutrition before it occurs prevents the suffering it causes to children and other vulnerable people. Prevention is also cost effective. The cost of preventing malnutrition among children under two is half that of treating children who are already severely malnourished.

Preventing stunting
Stunting is an indicator of chronic malnutrition and is defined as growth failure over time. It is the direct result of a gap between nutrient needs and nutrient intake and/or disease during the first 1,000 days of life. Stunting can only be prevented; it cannot be reversed. WFP uses a life cycle approach to good nutrition for stunting prevention, targeting adolescents, pregnant and breastfeeding women and children 6-23 months of age. WFP focuses on ensuring nutrient-dense diets, as well as working with partners in health, water, sanitation and social protection and other sectors to deliver comprehensive strategies. These innovative solutions require innovative financing, for example the pilot partnership for under-two nutrition that WFP and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) are managing together with the government in Malawi.

Addressing micronutrient deficiencies
Micronutrients are vitamins and minerals necessary for health and development. In addition to staple food fortification, micronutrient powders are one part of a cost-effective strategy to address deficiencies. The powders deliver 15 essential micronutrients and can be added to any food where larger scale fortification is not possible. WFP works with private sector partners such as DSM to make fortified foods and micronutrient powders more accessible and available to the most vulnerable people.

A focus on the first 1,000 days
The importance of good nutrition starts in the womb. Children will reach their full adult potential only if they receive proper nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life, from conception to their second birthday. Children whose mothers are malnourished during and before pregnancy will be born already malnourished, thus creating an intergenerational cycle of malnutrition.

Poor nutrition in the first 1,000 days can lead to stunting, and have irreversible development impacts on the child. Poor nutrition affects a child’s health, brain development, school performance and future earnings. It also puts children at a higher risk of dying from infectious diseases than other children.

Reaching women and adolescent girls before pregnancy is optimal. Pregnancy accounts for the first 270 days of this limited window of opportunity, and WFP ensures that pregnant women can access fortified and fresh nutritious diets. From birth to the first six months of life, WFP programmes reach breastfeeding mothers with food assistance and encourages exclusive breastfeeding which helps to build the infant’s immune system.

After the baby is six months old, breast milk alone is no longer enough to meet nutrient needs and children’s diets need food to complement breastfeeding. This food must be highly nutritious because small children have small appetites and each bite counts. In many food-insecure settings the availability of age-appropriate food for young children is limited. WFP therefore works with its partners to increase the availability of high quality complementary foods, and ensures vulnerable households can access nutritious diets.
Nutrition in emergencies and beyond
Increases in malnutrition are a common consequence of emergencies or crises. The immediate repercussions include increased mortality and deterioration in child health. Equally important, poor nutrition exacerbated by emergencies also has longer term consequences related to poor child growth and development. If not appropriately addressed, the negative consequences can often be irreversible. Treatment and prevention of undernutrition are an essential part of the emergency response, and help to lay the foundations for recovery and a healthy future.

Nutrition behaviour change
Supporting good nutrition includes empowering communities to make informed choices about healthy behaviours. In conjunction with more nutritious food baskets, WFP supports nutrition education and behaviour change communication to improve programme success.

Nutrition-sensitive activities
Nutrition-specific programmes ensuring adequate diets are essential, but WFP is also committed to improving the nutrition focus of all its programmes. From community planning to social protection programmes and nutrition-enhanced school meals, WFP is investing in making all its activities more nutrition-sensitive.

Evidence, Data and Analysis
WFP conducts nutrition situation analyses to understand the causes of malnutrition in different contexts. Tools enable nutrition stakeholders to estimate the gap between the nutritious diets people should have, and what they can actually afford, and to design programmes that address those dietary shortfalls in the most effective way. WFP also undertakes operational research to improve nutrition programme quality and contribute to the global evidence base. In 2015, studies included rice fortification, nutrition for adolescents, and treatment of moderate acute malnutrition.

Building capacity of partners
Beyond implementation, WFP supports partner governments with national solutions to tackle undernutrition, including support and guidance on policy development, programme design, and relevant data collection and analysis.