

Malnutrition

Malnutrition is not the same as hunger.

Malnutrition is not merely the result of too little food. It's not only about how much food children get, it's what's in the food that counts. Without the right amounts of vitamins and essential nutrients in their diet, young kids become vulnerable to disease that they would normally be able to fight off easily. It is an illness caused by a lack of essential nutrients.

Malnutrition is associated with half of all deaths in children under the age of five each year. The risk of death is particularly high for children with severe malnutrition, up to 20 times higher than a healthy child.

Rapidly growing children have specific nutritional needs and small stomachs. They require food dense in energy and a range of nutrients, which is best achieved by providing them animal-source foods such as dairy, eggs, meat or fish. Quality of food is as important as quantity. In 2008, increasing food prices will increase malnutrition, with families not able to afford food nutritious enough for young children to grow, and to both avoid and overcome disease.

"In Somalia we are giving acutely malnourished kids packets of ready-to-use food and we see them gain weight and begin thriving within a couple of weeks," said Dr Gustavo Fernandez, MSF Head of Mission in Somalia.

Ready-to-use food is practical to use in places like Somalia where security is very bad. It comes in individually wrapped rations, and contains all the necessary nutrients, vitamins, and minerals that a young child needs. This dense therapeutic food, which contains milk powder, sugars and vegetable fats, can be produced and stored locally and transported easily even in hot climates. It allows a child to recover from being malnourished and catch up on lost growth. Being easy-to-use, mothers—not doctors and nurses—are the main caregivers, and this means that far more children at risk can be reached.

Children have the right to good quality healthcare, to clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment, so that they will stay healthy. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24)

Did you know?

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates there are 178 million malnourished children across the globe, and at any given moment, 20 million suffering from the most severe form of malnutrition. Malnutrition contributes to between 3.5 and 5 million deaths in children under five every year.



In Somalia, approximately one in seven children under the age of five are seriously malnourished.