Persistent high food prices and the continuing global economic crisis have led to an increase in hunger and malnutrition. Children, particularly those younger than 2, are at special risk of hunger. The consequences of malnutrition during these early years of life are long-term and irreversible.

The 1,000-day period between pregnancy and a child’s second birthday is a unique opportunity to shape a healthier, more prosperous future for children. Proper nutrition during this time has a profound and lasting impact on a child’s growth, learning, and eventual economic productivity.

Mitigating or overcoming malnutrition in young girls can “break the cycle” so that they enjoy better health and grow into women who have healthier babies.

Nutrition, the Critical Role of Women, and the 1,000-Day Window

In nearly all cultures, women bear the major responsibility for their families’ nutrition. However, they are often undernourished due to social, economic, and biological stressors. When a woman’s position in society is improved, her overall nutrition also improves.

It is important to link programs that aim to prevent malnutrition with those that empower women and improve their lives. Women in developing countries have responsibility not only for food production and preparation but also for raising families. Improving women’s nutrition during pregnancy can help safeguard their health and ensure that their children get the best possible start in life.

Where there is hunger and poverty, there is almost always poor access to maternal and child health care. A growing body of scientific evidence shows that improving nutrition during this period is one of the best investments we can make to achieve lasting progress against global poverty and hunger.

What is Undernutrition?

Undernutrition is a serious condition in which the body does not get the nutrients it needs to sustain healthy growth and development. It arises when there is inadequate consumption, poor absorption or an excessive loss of nutrients. Undernutrition is a form of malnutrition and sometimes the two terms are used interchangeably.

Many factors cause undernutrition:

- Not enough food and not enough diverse, nutritious food.
- Poor maternal care and childcare practices due to a lack of knowledge about healthy diets and infant care on the part of mothers and other caregivers in the family.
- Lack of health services, clean water, and sanitation.

In countries where gender inequality is great, there can be high rates of undernutrition as female members of a
household will “eat least and last.” Fundamentally, poverty is at the root of undernutrition. Very poor people are generally unable to afford the foods, education, or health care they need to nourish themselves or their children.

**Child Malnutrition and Stunting**

According to a Save the Children report, “A Life Free from Hunger,” malnutrition is an underlying cause of death for 2.6 million children every year. Malnutrition also causes stunting: One in four of the world’s children are stunted (nearly one in three in developing countries), and 80 percent of stunted children live in just 20 countries.

These 170 million children are not only too short for their age, they’re also likely to enroll in school later and do less well academically. The report also noted:

- Global progress on stunting has been slow. The proportion of children who are stunted fell from 40 percent in 1990 to 27 percent in 2010—an average of just 0.6 percent per year.
- The poorest children in developing countries are two times more likely to be chronically malnourished than other, wealthier children.
- 450 million children will be affected by stunting in the next 15 years, if current trends continue.

**What Can Be Done?**

Direct nutrition interventions can be simple solutions delivered to children at risk and their families. These are well-known and supported by nutrition experts. They include supplementation with micronutrients such as zinc and Vitamin A; iodizing salt; promoting healthy behaviors such as exclusive breast-feeding for six months; hand washing and improved sanitation; and better complementary feeding practices. Fortification, or the process of adding vitamins and minerals to food, is another inexpensive intervention.

**Governments are Scaling Up Nutrition**

The United States has shown considerable leadership in its efforts to reduce global hunger. Other bilateral donors, multilateral development banks, and international organizations are stepping up as well. In this country, we have formed the 1,000 Days Partnership to support the global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement. 1,000 Days promotes targeted action and investments in nutrition to break the cycle of poverty. SUN brings together more than 100 governments and organizations committed to working together to fight hunger and malnutrition.

---

**Evidence Based Direct Interventions to Prevent and Treat Undernutrition**

**Promoting good nutritional practices:**
- exclusive breastfeeding for a six-month period
- complementary feeding for infants being weaned
- improved hygiene and sanitation practices

**Provision of micronutrients for young children and their mothers:**
- periodic Vitamin A supplements
- therapeutic zinc supplements for diarrhea management
- multiple micronutrient powders
- de-worming drugs for children (to reduce losses of nutrients)
- iron-folic acid supplements for pregnant women to prevent and treat anemia
- iodized oil capsules where iodized salt is unavailable

**Provision of micronutrients through food fortification for all:**
- salt iodization
- iron fortification of staple foods

**Therapeutic feeding for malnourished children with special foods:**
- prevention or treatment for moderate undernutrition
- treatment of severe undernutrition (severe acute malnutrition) with ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF)
