

MALNUTRITION IN CHILDREN: UNDERSTANDING CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND EVIDENCE-BASED PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Mahfuz mujeeb , Medical Student, Samarkand state medical university Uzbekistan,
mahfuz542613@gmail.com

Hiba nasrin, Medical Student, Samarkand state medical university Uzbekistan,
Hibanazrinkm@gmail.com

Jim Gautham, Medical Student, Samarkand state medical university, Uzbekistan,
gauthamjithu888@gmail.com

Ilma khan , Medical Student, Samarkand state medical university Uzbekistan
ilmakhan291005@gmail.com

Abstract

Childhood malnutrition remains one of the most pressing public health challenges of the twenty-first century, affecting millions of children across high-income, middle-income, and low-income nations alike. The condition encompasses a spectrum of nutritional disorders, including undernutrition manifested as stunting, wasting, and micronutrient deficiencies, as well as the rising burden of overweight and obesity among pediatric populations. The first two years of life represent a particularly vulnerable window during which inadequate nutrition can cause irreversible damage to physical growth, cognitive development, and immune function. This narrative review examines the multifactorial etiology of childhood malnutrition, analyzes current global burden data, discusses the short-term and long-term health consequences, and evaluates evidence-based prevention and treatment interventions. By synthesizing recent findings from the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and peer-reviewed epidemiological literature, this article provides a comprehensive overview intended for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and public health practitioners committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals related to child survival and well-being.

1. Introduction

Malnutrition, in its broadest sense, refers to deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in a person's intake of energy and nutrients. In pediatric populations, malnutrition manifests through three primary pathways: undernutrition, micronutrient-related malnutrition, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases such as overweight and obesity. The World Health Organization defines undernutrition through three anthropometric indicators: wasting (low weight-for-height), stunting (low height-for-age), and underweight (low weight-for-age). Nearly half of all deaths among children under five years of age are linked to undernutrition, with the vast majority occurring in low- and middle-income countries.

The developmental, economic, social, and medical impacts of childhood malnutrition are profound and lasting. A child who suffers from chronic undernutrition during the first 1,000 days—from conception through the second birthday—faces increased susceptibility to infectious diseases, impaired neurodevelopment, reduced educational attainment, and diminished economic productivity in adulthood. These individual-level consequences translate into substantial macroeconomic losses, with some estimates suggesting that countries lose up to 11% of their gross domestic product annually due to malnutrition-related productivity deficits.

Understanding the determinants of childhood malnutrition requires a multisystem perspective that recognizes the interplay between food systems, health services, environmental conditions, and socioeconomic structures. This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the types, causes, global distribution, health consequences, and prevention strategies for childhood malnutrition, drawing upon the most recent global health data and policy frameworks.

2. Classification and Types of Childhood Malnutrition

Childhood malnutrition is not a monolithic condition but rather encompasses several distinct clinical and epidemiological entities. Accurate classification is essential for appropriate surveillance, clinical management, and public health intervention.

2.1 Undernutrition

Undernutrition represents the most visible and historically prevalent form of childhood malnutrition. It includes three primary manifestations:

Stunting refers to impaired linear growth and development resulting from chronic undernutrition, repeated infection, and inadequate psychosocial stimulation. Children are defined as stunted when their height-for-age Z-score is more than two standard

deviations below the median of the WHO Child Growth Standards. Stunting typically reflects prolonged nutritional deprivation and often begins in utero, making it a marker of chronic malnutrition.

Wasting indicates acute undernutrition characterized by rapid weight loss or failure to gain weight. A child is classified as wasted when their weight-for-height Z-score falls below minus two standard deviations. Severe wasting, defined as a weight-for-height Z-score below minus three standard deviations or the presence of bilateral pitting edema, constitutes a medical emergency requiring immediate therapeutic intervention.

Underweight combines elements of both chronic and acute undernutrition, as it is defined by a weight-for-age Z-score below minus two standard deviations. While less specific than stunting or wasting alone, underweight remains a useful population-level indicator of overall nutritional deprivation.

2.2 Micronutrient Deficiencies

Micronutrient deficiencies, often termed “hidden hunger,” occur when children lack adequate vitamins and minerals essential for growth, development, and metabolic function. The most clinically significant micronutrient deficiencies in pediatric populations include:

Iron deficiency represents the most common nutritional deficiency globally, affecting an estimated 41.7% of children under five years. It is the primary cause of anemia, impairing cognitive development, reducing physical capacity, and increasing infection susceptibility.

Vitamin A deficiency affects approximately 190 million preschool children worldwide. It remains a leading cause of preventable childhood blindness and significantly increases mortality risk from measles and diarrheal diseases.

Iodine deficiency disorders can cause thyroid dysfunction, intellectual disability, and developmental delays. Although largely eliminated in regions with universal salt iodization programs, iodine deficiency persists in areas with inadequate coverage.

Zinc deficiency contributes to impaired immune function, increased diarrheal disease burden, and delayed wound healing.

2.3 Overweight and Obesity

The double burden of malnutrition has emerged as a critical concern, with increasing numbers of children in both high-income and low-income settings experiencing overweight and obesity. In 2022, an estimated 37 million children under five were overweight or obese. This form of malnutrition increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain malignancies later in life.

Table 1. Classification of Childhood Malnutrition

Type	Indicator	WHO Definition	Primary Causes	Global Prevalence (2024)
Stunting	Height-for-age Z-score	< -2 SD	Chronic undernutrition, recurrent infections	23.2% (150.2 million)
Wasting	Weight-for-height Z-score	< -2 SD	Acute undernutrition, acute illness	6.6% (42.8 million)
Severe Wasting	Weight-for-height Z-score	< -3 SD or bilateral edema	Severe acute food shortage, severe illness	2.1% (13.7 million)
Underweight	Weight-for-age Z-score	< -2 SD	Combined chronic and acute undernutrition	Variable by region
Overweight	Weight-for-height Z-score	> +2 SD	Excessive caloric intake, sedentary behavior	5.5% (35.5 million)
Iron Deficiency	Hemoglobin/ferritin levels	Hemoglobin < 11 g/dL (under 5)	Inadequate dietary iron, parasitic infections	41.7% of under-5 children
Vitamin A	Serum retinol	< 0.7 μmol/L	Insufficient dietary vitamin	190 million preschool children

Type	WHO Indicator	WHO Definition	Primary Causes	Global Prevalence (2024)
Deficiency			A, malabsorption	

Sources: WHO Global Nutrition Targets 2025; UNICEF-WHO-World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates 2025 edition.

3. Global Burden and Epidemiological Trends

The global landscape of childhood malnutrition has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades, characterized by overall reductions in undernutrition alongside persistent regional inequities and emerging challenges related to overweight and obesity.

3.1 Current Global Estimates

According to the 2025 edition of the Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates published by UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank, approximately 149 million children under five years were stunted in 2022, 45 million were wasted, and 37 million were overweight. By 2024, these figures showed modest improvements: stunting prevalence declined to 23.2% (affecting approximately 150.2 million children), wasting to 6.6% (42.8 million), and overweight to 5.5% (35.5 million). While the absolute number of stunted children has decreased from previous years, population growth means that millions of children continue to enter this category annually.

3.2 Regional Disparities

The burden of childhood malnutrition is not evenly distributed. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia bear the greatest share of the global undernutrition burden. Sub-Saharan Africa has consistently faced the most severe nutritional deficiencies, with the highest disability-adjusted life year (DALY) rates for protein-energy malnutrition and vitamin A deficiency. South Asia, meanwhile, records the highest age-standardized incidence rates for protein-energy malnutrition and dietary iron deficiency.

Conversely, high-income regions including North America and Western Europe have achieved the lowest undernutrition rates through robust public health programs. However, these regions have experienced a notable rise in protein-energy malnutrition

among specific vulnerable populations, potentially linked to ultra-processed dietary patterns and socioeconomic inequities. East Asia has demonstrated the steepest declines in vitamin A deficiency DALY rates, attributable largely to successful universal salt iodization and dietary diversification programs.

3.3 Trends Over Time

Between 1990 and 2021, the global burden of nutritional deficiencies among children aged 0–14 years declined substantially. The estimated annual percentage change in age-standardized DALY rates for protein-energy malnutrition was -5.05%, for vitamin A deficiency -2.65%, for iodine deficiency -2.70%, and for dietary iron deficiency -0.53%. Despite these improvements, children under five years of age continue to experience the highest DALY rates across all deficiency subtypes, underscoring the critical importance of early-life interventions.

The following infographic illustrates the three faces of malnutrition as documented in 2021:

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Figure 1. The Three Faces of Malnutrition in 2021: Stunting (149 million children), Wasting (45 million children), and Overweight (39 million children). Source: UNICEF-WHO-World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates.

4. Causes and Risk Factors

Childhood malnutrition arises from a complex interplay of immediate, underlying, and basic determinants. The UNICEF conceptual framework for maternal and child nutrition provides a useful model for understanding these layered causal pathways.

4.1 Immediate Causes

At the most proximal level, malnutrition results from inadequate dietary intake and disease. Children require sufficient quantities of macronutrients (proteins, carbohydrates, and fats) and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) to support rapid growth and immune function. When dietary intake is insufficient in quantity or quality, or when nutrient absorption is impaired by infectious diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory infections, or intestinal parasites, nutritional status deteriorates. The bidirectional relationship between infection and malnutrition creates a vicious cycle: undernutrition weakens immune defenses, increasing infection susceptibility, while

infections reduce appetite and nutrient absorption, further compromising nutritional status.

4.2 Underlying Causes

Three critical underlying factors mediate the relationship between basic structural conditions and immediate nutritional outcomes:

Household food insecurity limits access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. Food insecurity may stem from poverty, agricultural shocks, conflict, or climate-related disasters that disrupt local food systems.

Inadequate caregiving practices encompass suboptimal breastfeeding, improper complementary feeding, and insufficient responsive care. The WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, followed by continued breastfeeding with appropriate complementary foods until two years or beyond. However, global compliance with these recommendations remains suboptimal, with many infants receiving prelacteal feeds, early introduction of formula, or nutritionally inadequate complementary foods.

Unhealthy household environments characterized by poor water quality, inadequate sanitation, and limited hygiene practices increase pathogen exposure and infection risk. Children living in environments without clean drinking water or proper waste disposal face substantially elevated risks of diarrheal diseases and environmental enteric dysfunction, both of which compromise nutrient absorption.

4.3 Basic Causes

At the structural level, poverty remains the fundamental driver of childhood malnutrition. Families living in extreme poverty lack the financial resources to purchase nutritious foods, access healthcare, or maintain healthy living environments. Conflict and political instability disrupt food systems, destroy health infrastructure, and displace populations, creating humanitarian crises in which child malnutrition rates escalate dramatically. Climate change exacerbates food insecurity through altered precipitation patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and declining agricultural productivity. Gender inequality further compounds these risks, as women and girls often experience disproportionate food insecurity within households, and maternal undernutrition directly affects fetal development and infant birth outcomes.

The following image illustrates the ten countries with the highest malnutrition burden in children aged 6–59 months:

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Figure 2. Ten Countries with the Highest Acute Malnutrition Burden in Children Aged 6–59 Months (2024 Data). Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan report the highest numbers of children with moderate and severe acute malnutrition. Source: 2025 Global Report on Food Crises.

5. Health Consequences

The consequences of childhood malnutrition extend far beyond the immediate risk of mortality, creating cascading effects across the life course that impact individual health, cognitive capacity, and economic potential.

5.1 Mortality and Morbidity

Severe acute malnutrition dramatically increases mortality risk. A wasted child is approximately three times more likely to die than a healthy child of the same age. Globally, wasting is responsible for approximately 2 million deaths annually among children under five. The pathophysiology of malnutrition-related mortality involves immune suppression, impaired tissue repair, and loss of organ function. Malnourished children are particularly vulnerable to common childhood infections including pneumonia, diarrhea, measles, and malaria, which might be survivable in well-nourished children but become life-threatening in the context of undernutrition.

5.2 Cognitive and Developmental Impairment

The developing brain is exquisitely sensitive to nutritional insults. Protein-energy malnutrition during critical periods of brain development can cause irreversible deficits in neuronal number, synaptic connectivity, and myelination. Iron deficiency, even in the absence of anemia, impairs dopaminergic neurotransmission and reduces attention, learning capacity, and school performance. Iodine deficiency during pregnancy and early childhood causes irreversible intellectual disability and cretinism in severe cases. Vitamin A deficiency damages corneal epithelium and retinal function, leading to night blindness and, in advanced cases, permanent blindness.

Children who experience early undernutrition demonstrate lower IQ scores, reduced language development, and poorer executive function compared to well-nourished

peers. These cognitive deficits translate into reduced educational attainment and lower lifetime earnings.

5.3 Long-term Economic and Social Consequences

At the population level, childhood malnutrition imposes enormous economic costs. Adults who were stunted as children earn approximately 20% less than their non-stunted counterparts. The combined effects of reduced productivity, increased healthcare expenditures, and lost educational potential cost developing nations billions of dollars annually. Furthermore, malnutrition perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty, as undernourished girls grow into undernourished mothers who give birth to low-birth-weight infants predisposed to growth failure.

6. Prevention and Management Strategies

Addressing childhood malnutrition requires a multisectoral approach that combines nutrition-specific interventions with nutrition-sensitive policies across food, health, social protection, water and sanitation, and education systems.

6.1 Promotion of Optimal Infant and Young Child Feeding

Breastfeeding represents the single most effective preventive intervention against child malnutrition. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months provides optimal nutrition, immune protection, and bonding opportunities while reducing infection risk. After six months, timely introduction of nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods, while continuing breastfeeding until two years or beyond, ensures that growing children receive sufficient energy and micronutrients.

Nutrition counseling and skilled breastfeeding support empower caregivers to make informed feeding decisions. Community-based support groups, peer counselors, and trained health workers play essential roles in promoting optimal infant and young child feeding practices, particularly in settings where commercial infant formula marketing pressures influence feeding choices.

6.2 Micronutrient Supplementation and Fortification

Vitamin A supplementation remains a cornerstone of child survival programs. UNICEF delivered more than 450 million vitamin A capsules to 64 countries in 2024, reaching over 320 million children with two annual doses. High-dose vitamin A

supplementation reduces all-cause mortality by approximately 12–24% in deficient populations.

Iron and folic acid supplementation programs target children and adolescents, particularly girls, who face elevated iron requirements due to rapid growth and menstruation. Weekly iron and folic acid supplementation delivered through schools and community platforms has proven effective in reducing anemia prevalence.

Multiple micronutrient powders (MNPs) containing iron, zinc, vitamin A, and other essential nutrients can be added to home-prepared complementary foods, improving the micronutrient density of young children's diets. However, MNPs should not be used concurrently with small quantity lipid-based nutrient supplements (SQ-LNS) to avoid excessive nutrient intake.

Food fortification of staple foods—including cereal flour, cooking oil, and salt—with essential vitamins and minerals provides population-level protection against deficiency. Universal salt iodization has virtually eliminated iodine deficiency disorders in many regions and represents one of public health's greatest success stories.

6.3 Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM)

The advent of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) has revolutionized the treatment of severe acute malnutrition. RUTF is an energy-dense paste made from peanuts, dried milk, vegetable oil, sugar, and a comprehensive micronutrient premix. Because it contains no water, RUTF resists bacterial contamination and can be stored safely at room temperature for extended periods.

Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) programs enable children with severe acute malnutrition but without medical complications to be treated at home, with weekly or biweekly visits to local health facilities for monitoring and resupply. This approach maximizes treatment coverage, reduces hospital-acquired infection risk, minimizes disruption to family livelihoods, and has proven as cost-effective as other high-impact public health interventions such as oral rehydration therapy.

Children with severe acute malnutrition and medical complications—including severe infections, hypoglycemia, hypothermia, or anorexia—require initial inpatient stabilization using therapeutic milk formulas (F-75 and F-100) before transitioning to outpatient RUTF-based care. All severely malnourished children require broad-spectrum antibiotic therapy, as infection and malnutrition coexist invisibly even when clinical signs are absent.

The following image illustrates the WHO framework for addressing wasting:

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Figure 3. WHO Framework for Addressing Wasting in Children. The goal is to reduce and maintain childhood wasting to less than 5% by 2025 through scale-up of treatment, coordination, and evidence-building. Source: WHO Global Nutrition Targets 2025.

6.4 School-Based Nutrition Programs

School feeding programs provide regular meals or snacks to children attending educational institutions, improving attendance, concentration, and nutritional status simultaneously. In 2024, UNICEF supported programs reaching 139.2 million school-age children and adolescents across 77 countries. These programs increasingly emphasize provision of diverse, nutrient-rich foods rather than simple calorie provision, addressing the double burden of malnutrition.

6.5 Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

Improving water quality, sanitation infrastructure, and hygiene practices reduces diarrheal disease incidence and environmental enteric dysfunction, thereby improving nutrient absorption. Handwashing with soap, safe water storage, and proper food handling practices are low-cost interventions with substantial nutritional benefits.

6.6 Social Protection and Economic Interventions

Cash transfer programs, food vouchers, and social safety nets enable poor families to purchase nutritious foods and access healthcare. Integrating nutrition counseling and behavior change communication with social protection programs enhances their impact on child nutritional outcomes. The “First Foods Africa” initiative launched by UNICEF in 2024 exemplifies efforts to transform local food systems and protect the diets of 125 million children under five in fourteen African nations.

The following image illustrates a healthy eating framework for children:

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Figure 4. Healthy Eating Frameworks for Children. (A) Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Kid’s Healthy Eating Plate emphasizes balanced proportions of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and healthy proteins. (B) A general healthy plate model

recommends half the plate as vegetables and fruits, one-quarter as grains, and one-quarter as protein sources.

7. Conclusion

Childhood malnutrition represents a preventable tragedy that continues to claim millions of lives and diminish human potential worldwide. While significant progress has been achieved over the past three decades—evidenced by declining stunting rates, expanded vitamin A coverage, and the global scale-up of community-based acute malnutrition treatment—profound inequities persist. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia continue to shoulder the greatest burden, while new challenges including climate change, conflict, and the double burden of undernutrition alongside overweight require adaptive policy responses.

Effective prevention and management of childhood malnutrition demand coordinated action across multiple sectors. Nutrition-specific interventions—including breastfeeding promotion, micronutrient supplementation, RUTF-based treatment, and school feeding—must be integrated with nutrition-sensitive approaches in agriculture, social protection, WASH, and health systems strengthening. The first 1,000 days from conception through age two remain the critical window for intervention, but the nutritional needs of school-age children and adolescents, particularly girls, demand increasing attention.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of zero hunger and ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030 requires sustained political commitment, adequate financing, and community engagement. By investing in proven, cost-effective interventions and addressing the structural determinants of food insecurity, the global community can ensure that every child has the opportunity to survive, thrive, and reach their full developmental potential.

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