

# Global Child Malnutrition

## 2022 STATISTICS AND FACTS



March 2024

### Good nutrition is foundational

Hunger is hardest on children, especially those under the age of five—a critical period of growth and development.

Young children are more vulnerable to death and disease because their immune systems are still developing. Good nutrition—all the nutrients, vitamins, and minerals a body needs to work best—protects children from illness and builds resilience for the rest of their days.

However, the need for a nutritious diet does not stop at age five.

During middle childhood (ages 5-9), mental, social, and physical development continues. Later, the rapid growth and development during puberty means that adolescents (ages 10-19) require high amounts of energy, protein, and micronutrients (small amounts of essential vitamins and minerals).

At every stage of a person's journey to adulthood, nutrition is fundamental. Every child deserves the opportunity to reach

their full potential. But without the proper building blocks, the road is fraught with danger.

### Progress against malnutrition

The danger of growing up malnourished is less of a threat today than it was three decades ago. There were 120 million fewer children impacted by stunting and wasting in 2022 than there were in 1990.

The world has made tremendous progress in reducing the number of children under the age of five who die each year. Roughly 12.8 million children died in 1990 compared to 4.9 million in 2022—about half of which are due to hunger-related causes.

This shows that positive change is possible with prevention and intervention.

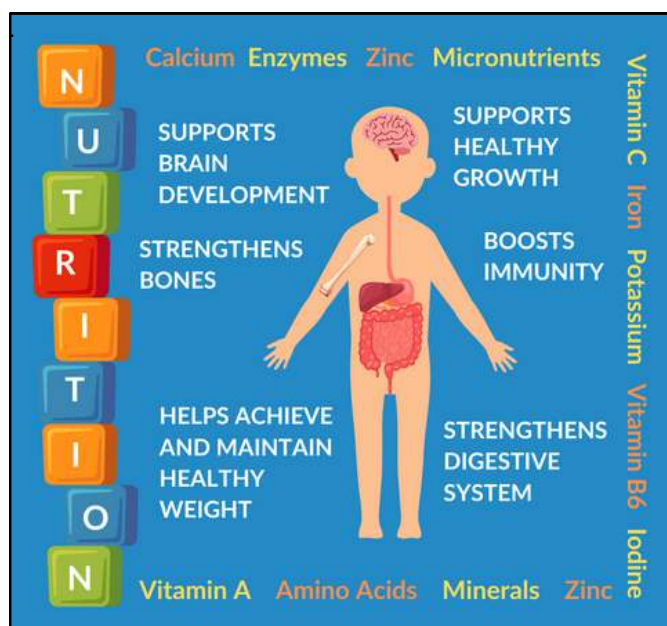
### The triple burden of malnutrition—2022 statistics

Despite remarkable advances, there are significant challenges ahead.

Current statistics reveal that progress on the triple burden of malnutrition—stunting, wasting, and obesity—has slowed. These three preventable forms of malnutrition continue to disadvantage one in three children each year.

**Stunting**, low height for age, impacts the most children globally. There were a little over 148 million stunted children under the age of five in 2022. Stunting occurs from infections and poor diet since birth or before. Even if a child's nutrition improves later in life, they may never gain back what they lose in cognitive and physical development, reducing their opportunities in life.

**Wasting**, underweight for their height, impacted an estimated 45 million children in 2022. Wasting is the life-threatening result of rapid weight loss or a failure to gain weight, again due to poor nutrition and illness. These children are at an increased risk of death and need immediate intervention.

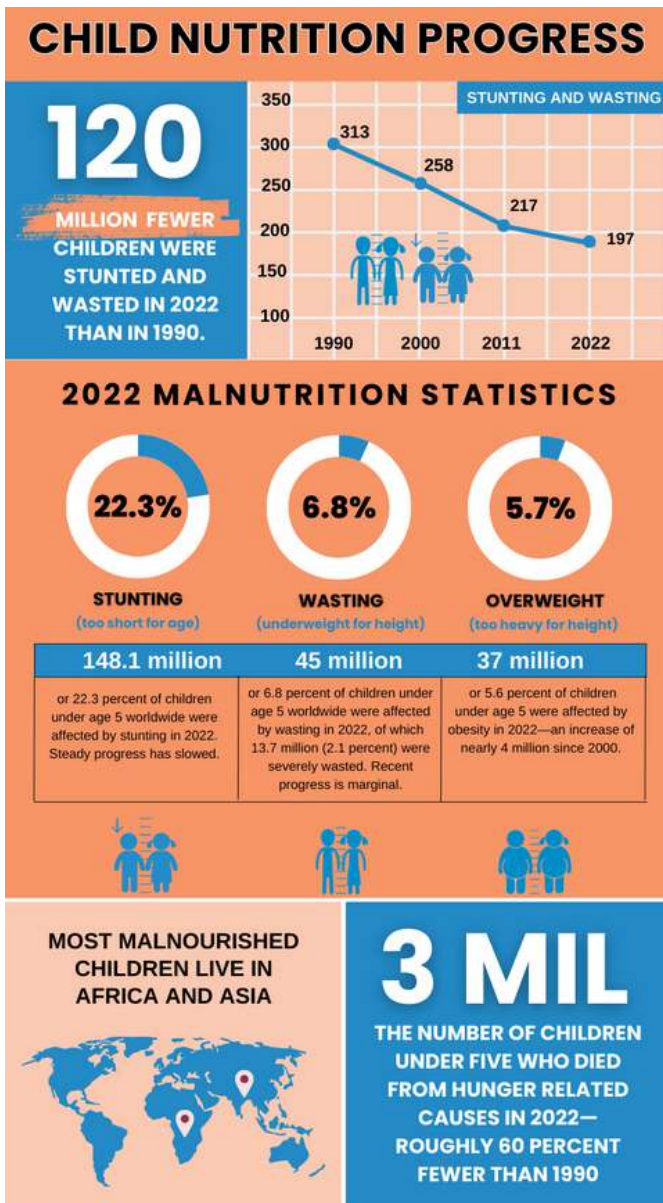


Wasting and stunting often go hand in hand and are found at elevated rates in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, with the highest prevalence in Asia and Africa.

**Obesity**, or children who are overweight for their height, is slowly increasing in all countries, regardless of income status. There are now 37 million children under five who are overweight. It may seem counterintuitive that obesity is a form of malnutrition. But it is a dangerous and growing problem driven by unhealthy food systems that prioritize and promote cheap, processed foods. Overweight children in this category lack the crucial nutrients necessary for health and development—nutrients like fiber, protein, vitamins, and minerals.



Aid workers track nutrition improvements in Nepal. The world has made steady progress on reducing stunting, the condition where a child is too short for their age due to malnourishment. (Photo: Fintrac Inc for Feed the Future)



### Why do researchers focus on children under the age of five?

The 2022 statistics reflect how perilous this first stage of a child's life can be, when so much needs to go right for a healthy future.

Children under the age of five are vulnerable to both the short- and long-term consequences of malnutrition. It is the best period to identify the risk factors contributing to hunger and recommend interventions to improve health outcomes for all children and the wider community.

### Increasing the focus on adolescent girls

Another category—adolescent girls—is drawing increased focus from experts dedicated to ending malnutrition.

In general, malnourished adolescents count as part of the global population statistics. In 2022, an estimated 735 million people across the globe were chronically undernourished. However, advancements in the study of malnutrition reveal a complex interplay of factors that led to a focus on adolescent girls for targeted interventions.

Undernourished girls are prone to anemia (iron deficiency) and are more likely to have children who are born too small and too thin, perpetuating the cycle of malnutrition.

It is critical to improve the nutrition of mothers, beginning when they are adolescent girls, to reduce malnutrition for all children.

### What causes malnutrition?

Poor diets are the direct causes of malnutrition. Underlying that is poverty. Too many families can't access or afford the nutritious food needed for a healthy life. Regions with the highest rates of child malnutrition are also the poorest.

Source: UNICEF/WHO/WORLD BANK Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates



An aid worker uses a MUAC tape to measure the circumference of a child's arm in Uganda. The color coded section indicate levels of malnutrition. Almost seven percent of the world's children are too thin for their height, an condition called wasting. (Photo: Bread for the World)

Global poverty, which increases malnutrition, is caused by an interplay of factors, including inequality, climate change, natural disasters, weak food systems, poor governance, and conflict.

Conflict, as an underlying cause, is a growing and urgent threat to child well-being. Since 2010, global conflicts have tripled, disrupting food and healthcare systems in many regions—systems that are vital supports for growing children. One out of every five stunted children lives in countries affected by conflict.

The tragic reality is that all forms of malnutrition are entirely preventable with scaled-up interventions. It is possible to save three million lives lost each year to this human-made crisis and avert the life-long cognitive and physical impacts for those who survive.

### Impacts of malnutrition

Healthy growth of a child's body and brain is compromised when they lack the foundation of a nutritious diet, thus robbing them and the world of their future potential. They have more difficulty learning, make less money as adults, and suffer life-long health consequences if they survive childhood. They are more susceptible to chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Further, they are more likely to remain in poverty.

The cost of malnutrition to individuals, families, and nations is enormous. Studies show that undernourished populations are

less productive. Their citizens are simply too unhealthy to support a vibrant workforce.

There are economic consequences when human capital is lost. Low- and middle-income countries lose an estimated \$8-38 billion through lost productivity yearly. The impact on the global economy could be as high as \$3.5 trillion.

### Prevention and intervention are the keys to progress

Although the world has made strides in reducing child malnutrition, without persistence, the trend could reverse, especially when challenges like conflict, climate change, inequity, and unhealthy food systems continue to grow as threats. Progress has slowed on stunting and wasting with spikes of acute malnutrition in Syria, Haiti, Sudan, and Gaza. In addition, child obesity has increased worldwide since 2000, and there has been no progress on anemia in reproductive women for over two decades.

The key to progress lies in access to safe, nutritious, and affordable diets and scaling up both prevention and intervention where malnutrition is most likely to occur.

Improving food systems, sustainable agricultural practices, and reducing inequality and conflict will go far in addressing the underlying causes of malnutrition. Nutrition interventions that address the immediate causes are consistently effective—interventions such as the promotion of breastfeeding, micronutrient and vitamin supplementation for children and pregnant women, and fortifying staple foods like rice with vital nutrients like zinc or Vitamin A.

### Good nutrition is non-negotiable

Food is a human right denied to too many children in the years when good nutrition is non-negotiable as the foundation for a healthy life. We can and must do better. Increasing your knowledge of the issue is a first step.



Intervention tactics, such as distributing fortified bulgur in Haiti and administering Plumpy'nut at feeding centers in Ethiopia, are two methods through which USAID helps introduce micronutrients into regions struggling with malnutrition (Photos: USAID).

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