

Severe Malnutrition: A Devastating Side Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic

KEY POINTS

- COVID-19-related disruptions to food and health systems are causing rates of **severe malnutrition to rise substantially**.
- Recent estimates show that by 2022, these disruptions could leave an additional 12 million children severely malnourished, **making them up to 11 times more likely to die than their well-nourished peers**.
- Those who do survive a severe bout of malnutrition in early childhood are much more likely to suffer from **lifelong illness and impaired cognitive development**.
- If we act now, **these long-term impacts and child deaths are preventable**.
- **The heads of four key United Nations agencies recently identified a US \$2.4 billion ‘Essential Package’ of four life-saving nutrition interventions** that can be deployed today to make an immediate impact on the number of child deaths and disabilities this pandemic causes.

We call on the United States Government to commit \$500 million to support an immediate rollout of the essential package and ensure addressing malnutrition is a central pillar in the US global COVID 19 response strategy.

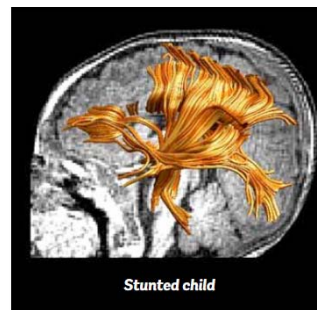


“Routine Immunization during COVID-19” by UNICEF Ethiopia is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

A RISING THREAT TO CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD

In an average year, 3.1 million children die from malnutrition – more people than the population of the city of Chicago. This year, COVID-19-related disruptions to food and health systems are causing rates of malnutrition to rise substantially. Experts are especially concerned about a dramatic rise in a dangerous form of malnutrition called wasting, which increases a child’s chances of dying by up to 11 times.

The most recent estimates show that by 2022, these disruptions could leave an additional 12 million severely malnourished, including an additional 9.3 million wasted kids. In many parts of the world, malnutrition related to the pandemic is projected to kill more people, especially children, than the pandemic itself.



Stunted child



Healthy, well-nourished child

Source: Unleashing Gains in Economic Productivity with Investments in Nutrition, World Bank Group

A healthy, cared-for child has a more developed brain than a malnourished child.

What can we do?

THE UNITED NATIONS ESSENTIAL PACKAGE

The heads of four key United Nations agencies¹ recently came together with a clear call to action: we need to act now to ensure that hungry children are not facing a death sentence. The agency heads identified a US \$2.4 billion 'Essential Package' of four life-saving nutrition interventions that can be deployed today to make an immediate impact on the number of child deaths and disabilities this pandemic causes.

The United States is already a leader in the fight against child malnutrition, but the fight has become even more challenging. We call on the United States Government to step up to the challenge and commit \$500 million to support an immediate rollout of the essential package. Addressing malnutrition must be a central pillar in any global COVID 19 response strategy, and the essential package is a critical first step.

ESSENTIAL NUTRITION PACKAGE COMPONENTS



Treating children who are dying with life-saving therapeutic foods.



Preventing malnutrition in children through actions like ensuring mothers have access to the prenatal vitamins they need.



Continuing large-scale Vitamin A supplementation for children.



Support for breastfeeding mothers.



THE LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN THESE ESSENTIAL INTERVENTIONS

If sustainably scaled, these high-impact interventions will not only save children today but continue to reduce cases of malnutrition for years to come. Nutrition interventions are some of the “best buys” in global development, and leading economists consistently rank nutrition interventions as among the most cost-effective ways to save and improve lives around the world. Not only are many nutrition interventions relatively inexpensive to implement, they also have an extremely high return on investment, with every \$1 invested yielding up to \$35 in economic returns. These economic returns accrue to individuals and society, setting both up for future success.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

Not only do the rising rates of malnutrition jeopardize decades of progress in the fight against hunger and malnutrition, it also threatens American security and the security of communities across the globe. Malnourished individuals are at a far greater risk of contracting and dying from infectious diseases, allowing these diseases to spread more easily. Improving nutritional status around the world is a key way to build resilience to future pandemics. No one is safe until everyone is safe.

¹ UNICEF, FAO, WFP, WHO