

When and why is malnutrition a problem?

LEARNING RESOURCE

Key Concepts

Malnutrition is the state of having inadequate absorption of the nutrients the body needs to sustain an active, productive life.

- There are different types of malnutrition.
 - *Undernutrition*, from not consuming/absorbing enough food.
 - *Overnutrition*, from consuming more than enough calories.
 - *Micronutrient malnutrition*, from not getting enough of certain micronutrients. Most common with iron, vitamin A, and iodine.
- Malnutrition has significant negative impacts on individuals, communities, and countries. It hurts our economies and leads to unnecessary loss of life and quality of life.
- There are multiple causes of malnutrition:
 - *Immediate causes* of malnutrition are inadequate food intake and disease.
 - *Underlying causes* of malnutrition are food insecurity, inadequate care and feeding practices, and poor healthcare, sanitation and hygiene.
 - Even more basic, malnutrition is *caused by systems* that create unequal and limited access to food and other resources.

Food insecurity is a major underlying cause of malnutrition. Four components are needed to address food insecurity, in order to make people and communities *food secure*.

- *Availability*: Food must be physically produced or procured for consumption.

- **Economic and physical accessibility:** Food must be transported to where it will be purchased and must be affordable relative to incomes and other non-food items.
- **Food utilization:** Food must be prepared in a way that preserves the quality of the food, consumed by all individuals in the household in amounts appropriate to their needs, and properly digested and absorbed by their bodies.
- **Stability over time:** Diet Implies a pattern of regular consumption. There cannot be seasons or periods of time where availability, accessibility, and utilization are inadequate.

Nutrition-specific interventions address the immediate causes of malnutrition: diet and disease. *These alone are not enough to solve malnutrition.*

Nutrition-sensitive interventions address underlying and systemic causes of malnutrition. They can be implemented in almost any sector/industry, including agriculture.

Practice and check your understanding

Say it out loud (to a colleague, a friend, or to yourself!) or write it here:

- What are the various types and causes of malnutrition?
- What are the dimensions of food security?
- What is the difference between nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions?

Further Reading

The World Health Organization has a [key fact sheet](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malnutrition) on the topic of malnutrition (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malnutrition>), as does [Global Nutrition Report](https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/about-malnutrition/) (<https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/about-malnutrition/>).

To find out the statistics for malnutrition in your communities, there are a number of online data banks and mapping tools. Here are two that offer country-level data:

- Our World in Data, compiled statistics on Hunger and Undernourishment <https://ourworldindata.org/hunger-and-undernourishment>

- UNICEF global and country level open data sets on malnutrition
<https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/>