

## Factors associated with wasting among children under five years old in South Asia: Implications for action

Research snapshot<sup>1</sup>

The continued high prevalence and burden of child wasting in South Asia is an urgent policy priority. The region's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' global target for wasting reduction requires the scale-up of evidence-based policies and programmes. Information on the determinants of wasting is an important component of this evidence base.

The analysis used data from national surveys in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan to examine the factors associated with wasting in children aged 0-59 months in each country, using multivariate logistic regression.

The prevalence of wasting varied from 9% in Afghanistan to 21% in India, while over 5% of children in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were both wasted and stunted. Two factors that were associated with an increased risk of wasting in all six countries were the child being aged under six months and maternal thinness (the mother having a body mass index <18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>). Other factors that were associated with wasting in one or more countries included those pertaining to the child (later birth order and being male), the mother (illiteracy and short maternal stature) and the household (household poverty and lack of an improved water source). Previous research

has found that all of these factors are associated with an increased risk of stunting in South Asia.

The current scale of child wasting in South Asia and its shared risk factors with stunting demand much greater investment in preventive interventions to reduce the prevalence of both wasting and stunting, while ensuring treatment is available to all wasted children who need it. Preventive interventions should focus on improving the nutrition of adolescents and women before and during pregnancy to prevent low birth weight and support the early initiation of breastfeeding and exclusive breastfeeding. There is also need for greater attention to women's education; empowerment and postnatal nutrition; quality complementary foods and hygienic feeding practices; safe water and sanitation; and nutrition-sensitive public sector actions across sectors.

<sup>1</sup> Harding, K. L., Aguayo, V. M., & Webb, P. (2018). Factors associated with wasting among children under five years old in South Asia: Implications for action. *PLoS ONE* 13(7): e0198749. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0198749>

## Improving women's nutrition is imperative for the rapid reduction of childhood stunting in South Asia

Research snapshot<sup>1</sup>

Maternal factors, both nutritional and non-nutritional, are a significant contributor to high rates of undernutrition in children in South Asia. The implications of direct nutrition interventions on women's nutrition, birth outcomes and stunting rates in South Asia are indisputable and well documented. This paper explores such maternal factors, presenting the evidence of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions to improve maternal nutrition status, birth outcomes and child undernutrition.

Over the last decade, studies have shown the impact of non-nutritional factors on women's

nutrition, birth outcomes, caring practices and nutritional status, including women's empowerment and gender inequality. Research highlights the role of an early marriage and conception age, poor secondary education, domestic violence, inadequate decision-making power, poor control over resources and strenuous agriculture activities in poor child nutrition outcomes.

The authors stress that, given these factors, it is critical to intervene not only in the first 1,000 days of life but also during adolescence, pre-conception and pregnancy to support optimal child growth. Interventions to prevent early marriage and conception, empower women, increase purchasing power and

encourage school attendance are important, as are cash transfers and microfinance. Nutrition-specific interventions are also essential and should aim to improve the nutrition status of women, ensuring they enter pregnancy with adequate height and weight and are free from anaemia. Increasingly, there is a need to also consider overweight and obesity in improving maternal nutrition in the region.

The paper concludes that a comprehensive approach is needed that combines nutrition-sensitive interventions with a package of evidence-based direct nutrition interventions. A range of programme platforms promoting health, education and the empowerment of women can be strategically used to reach women, improve maternal factors linked to birth outcomes and the growth of children and accelerate a reduction in child undernutrition rates in South Asia.

<sup>1</sup> Vir, S. C. 2016. Improving women's nutrition imperative for rapid reduction of childhood stunting in South Asia: coupling of nutrition specific interventions with nutrition sensitive measures essential. *Maternal&Child Nutrition* (2016), 12 (Suppl. 1), pp. 72–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mcn.12255>

## GLOBAL

## Wasting in the wider context of undernutrition: An ENN position paper

Research snapshot<sup>1</sup>



ENN has produced a position paper that explores how we view wasting in the wider context of undernutrition and what this means for nutrition and other sectors. Drawing upon our areas of work, the paper reflects evolving evidence and knowledge and aims to provide national and international actors with an overview of the current evidence and issues that can be considered in efforts to combat undernutrition.

The paper stresses that wasting cannot be viewed separately from other manifestations of undernutrition as all manifestations impact the growth, development and wellbeing of infants and children. Critically, the paper highlights the need to shift from a focus on anthropometric deficits to the consideration of the levels of risk of becoming wasted for both individuals and communities. Key preventative opportunities to avert risk throughout the lifecycle and seasonal calendar exist and should

be leveraged. These should include improving the health and nutrition of adolescent girls and pregnant women for their individual benefit and to optimise in utero growth and the subsequent growth of their infants and young children.

Triggering early action to avert individual risks and interrupt the process of wasting is vital. To support prevention and treatment efforts, country-level structures must be strengthened to deliver context-specific interventions. In protracted fragile contexts, a long-term development agenda is required. Global level mechanisms must support government-led and government-implemented programmes, informed by a coordinated knowledge and research agenda.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.enonline.net/attachments/3595/ENN-Wasting-Position-Paper\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.enonline.net/attachments/3595/ENN-Wasting-Position-Paper_FINAL.pdf)