

Growth faltering in early infancy: highlights from a two-day scientific consultation Report summary¹

Growth faltering among babies less than six months of age remains a significant concern in India which has not so far received adequate attention from a prevention, timely detection and management perspective. A two-day consultation on the subject was thus organised in October 2018 to examine the data and evidence on the identification and management of early growth failure and to identify knowledge gaps and future areas of research. The meeting, organised by the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council, the Indian Academy of Pediatrics, Vardhman Mahavir Medical College and Safdarjung Hospital and the Society for Applied Studies, was held in India. It highlighted both major areas of consensus and areas that require more action and further research.

Discussions around the epidemiology of growth failure in early infancy highlighted that this is an important area due to the high risk of mortality and morbidity in this age group. There is a lack of evidence to reach consensus around the best choice of indicators to use to help with the early identification, management and monitoring of growth faltering in community settings. Studies suggest that weight-for-age z-score (WAZ) may be the best

predictor of mortality among infants less than six months of age, the use of which could operationally simplify community-level assessment. Discussions regarding guidelines and current practices for the management of growth failure in early infancy focused on severe acute malnutrition (SAM) due to its association with a high risk of mortality. However, these guidelines lack evidence on the specific management of very young patients and are poorly implemented in the Indian context. Evidence is needed to foster effective lactation support for young infants and for assessing, where needed, effective and safe alternatives to breastfeeding. The feasibility, impact and cost-effectiveness of community-based management for uncomplicated cases among infants less than six months of age should be explored in trials and tested for the potential to scale up into existing delivery systems.

Optimal breastfeeding practices were identified by the group as central to preventing growth failure among infants less than six months of age. These must be supported by effective counselling services for mothers. Catch-up growth has been shown to reduce mortality and morbidity outcomes in the short term and neurodevelopment in later life. Available evidence points towards the need to pri-

oritise the first two to four months of age as the window of opportunity for maximising catch-up growth in pre-term and small for gestational age babies. The consultation recommended a focus on prevention to promote the survival, growth and development of low birth weight babies, taking into account the importance of the nutrition and health of the mothers. Integrated community-based efforts are needed to tackle underlying causes of undernutrition including early childbearing, poor sanitation, poverty and parental education. A reorganisation of the health system to facilitate the continuum of care from facility births through to follow up at home was recommended, with comprehensive models for the care of small and sick newborns extending beyond the neonatal period required. Models incorporating interventions such as a no separation policy of mothers and newborns and Kangaroo Mother Care with co-delivery of postnatal and early newborn care should be tested for scale up in programme settings.

¹ Aneja S, Kumar P, Choudhary TS, et al. Growth faltering in early infancy: highlights from a two-day scientific consultation. *BMC Proc.* 2020;14(Suppl 12):12. Published 2020 Sep 15. doi:10.1186/s12919-020-00195-z <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12919-020-00195-z>

REGIONAL

Lives upended - how COVID-19 threatens the futures of 600 million South Asian children

Report summary¹

The lives and futures of children across South Asia are threatened by the COVID-19 crisis. While they may be less susceptible to the virus itself, children are being profoundly affected by the economic and social consequences of 'lockdowns' and other measures taken to counter the pandemic. The knock-on economic and other effects of COVID-19 compromise the hard-won progress in advancing children's rights that South Asia has made in recent decades. With the pandemic expanding rapidly across a region that contains a quarter of the world's population, UNICEF's Lives Upended report describes the disastrous immediate and longer-term consequences that the virus and the measures to curb it have had on 600 million children and the services that they depend on.

In terms of nutrition, the massive loss of jobs and income has made it harder than ever for poorer families to provide nutritious meals for

their children. Rising food prices and scattered disruption to transport links and markets have made the task even more challenging. Even before the arrival of COVID-19, malnutrition was a grim fact of life for children throughout South Asia. Across the region, an estimated 7.7 million children under five years of age suffer from severe wasting and over 56 million – one third of all children in that age group – are stunted. A rise in severe wasting has been noticed, due to both the disruption of services and the fact that caretakers are not seeking treatment – for example, in Bangladesh there was a 90% drop in admissions for severely wasted children between February and a 15% rise in the prevalence of severe wasting over the past one year.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed critical, longstanding child-related issues in the region, as well as opportunities to respond. To tackle child undernutrition in the region national health

Sukhadi is distributed to the mothers of children between 3-6 years in Himdoloya Kedi Fadia, Gujarat



systems must deliver essential nutrition services alongside cash transfers or other social protection measures to ensure that enough nutritious food in vulnerable families for young children and pregnant or breastfeeding mothers alike.

¹ Simon Ingram. LIVES UPENDED: How COVID-19 threatens the futures of 600 million South Asian children. UNICEF, June 2020