

# Preventing Malnutrition

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## What Is Malnutrition?

“Malnutrition” means “bad nourishing.” Malnutrition comes from eating the wrong amount of food or from eating the wrong foods.

People sometimes eat too much food or choose foods that are high in calories and fat. This type of diet causes a person to become obese or fat. This can lead to health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

Other people, especially young children, often do not have enough food to eat, or they are given the wrong kinds of food. They suffer from a lack of nutrition. For example, they may not eat enough energy food, so their bodies are not getting enough calories. They may not eat enough protein, which is needed for children and young teens to grow well and become strong. (Foods such as meat, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, and beans are high in protein.) Children and teens may not take in enough vitamins. Without vitamins, they will not stay healthy. (Fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins.)

Poor nutrition can lead to other health problems, including poor growth, diarrhea, and frequent infections. In addition, a malnourished child or teen may have difficulty understanding and paying attention at work and at school. Malnourished children often die. Up to half of the deaths of young children under the age of 5 are related to malnutrition.

Malnutrition causes serious problems, but these problems can be prevented if a child or teen eats well.

## Types of Malnutrition

There are 2 main types of malnutrition.

Babies and young children who do not eat enough calories (or energy food) over time may develop marasmus. (“Marasmus” means “wasting away.”) They do not grow well. Their bodies become thin, and they look old and wrinkled. They develop faces like old men. They have thin faces with sunken cheeks and large eyes. They have flabby muscles. These children are usually irritable and cry a lot, but they have a good appetite. They often get sick.

When children do not eat the right kind of food over a long time, or they do not eat food containing enough protein, they may develop kwashiorkor or “kwash.” This may happen when a child is weaned from the breast after a second child is born or when children eat only a cereal-based porridge. Their bellies and legs may swell and make them look fat. They have pitting edema of the feet. This means that when you press on their feet with your thumbs, you can see the thumbprints afterward. These children often have thin or reddish hair and sores on their skin or around their mouths. They have “moon faces” because of their hanging cheeks. They are not interesting in eating or in what is happening around them.

## Preventing Malnutrition

Malnutrition can be prevented. Children and teens must be given a balanced diet of healthy foods. This helps them to grow well and become strong. Here are some suggestions:

- Babies under 6 months should be given only breast milk. They do not need extra water, milk, formula, or food. Breast-feeding may continue until they are 2 years old or even older.
- Teens, children, and babies over 6 months old should eat a variety of healthy foods, including a mixture of energy foods, foods high in protein, and fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins. Meat, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, beans, and nuts are good sources of protein.
- Teens, children, and babies over 6 months old should drink only safe water and wash their hands regularly. Children, teens, and their caregivers should wash their hands after going to the bathroom and before preparing and eating food. This helps to prevent the spread of diarrhea.