

Malnutrition in Pakistani children, its causes, consequences and recommendations

Madam, malnutrition is a pathological condition resulting from deficiency of one or more nutrients and has a wide range of clinical manifestations. Children are amongst the worst-affected groups. In 2001, it was noted that malnutrition caused 54% deaths in children living in developing countries.¹ The World Health Organization through the Millennium Development Goal 4 has recognized that improved nutrition is crucial in reducing the under-5-years mortality, especially in the developing countries.²

Laying its special emphasis in our part of the world, the percentage of malnourished children is highest in Asia with 70% of undernourished children living in this part of the world. In South Asia, one out of two preschoolers is underweight and has stunted growth.³ In Pakistan, 33.03% (CI= 27.96-38.54) of children under the age of 5 are underweight, 53.38% of the children are stunted and wasting has been reported in 11.52% of the children,⁴ which clearly shows that the nutritional status in this country is poor. Goiter caused by iodine deficiency is also common with the highest cases reported in Pakistan, India and parts of Indonesia.³

Marasmus, Kwashiorkor or Marasmus Kwashiorkor will probably develop in a child who is malnourished for a prolonged period of time leading to an increased mortality. Children who are undernourished are more susceptible to the effects of infectious diseases compared to children who are adequately nourished.¹ Infections can in turn lead to more undernourishment as food intake is decreased during infection and this turns into a vicious cycle.

One of the possible causes of such status could be declined production of food.¹ Many landscapes that were once fertile are deemed barren due to environmental pollution caused by mankind. This in turn leads to less land that is available for farming and ultimately food production per acre is insufficient to touch base with other countries. Poverty, unawareness, population growth, political

instability, loss of food stock due to poor harvest and natural calamities are some of the important factors causing malnutrition amongst children. Malnutrition in Pakistani children has been directly linked to illiteracy of mothers, low family income and larger family size.⁵ Maternal undernourishment is also a contributing factor to babies being born with low-birth-weight.¹ The increased basal metabolic rate due to acute and chronic illnesses may also precipitate the pre-existing malnutrition.

To solve the problems causing malnutrition among Pakistani children, the following measures are suggested: Various methods like the use of fertilizers would give a better crop. Policies should be made by the government to provide food security to the masses. Educational programmes should be planned that elucidate the importance of various components in a child's diet and also inform people about cheaper food alternatives that can provide them with vital nutrients. Controlling the growth of population and providing family planning guidance will lead to more food availability.

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