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# Nutrition During Famines



Photo Credit: Action Against Hunger, USA

**Famine has been declared in two counties of South Sudan, while other areas of South Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen are experiencing food security emergencies that could soon become famines. 20 million people are at risk of starvation in these countries, including 1.4 million children at “imminent risk of death” from starvation and malnutrition.<sup>i</sup>**

## What is a famine?

- Famine means that 20 percent or more of the households in an area have “an extreme lack of food and other basic needs where starvation, death, and destitution are evident.”<sup>ii</sup>
- Famine is a rare and very specific circumstance. A famine is declared only when:<sup>iii</sup>
  - At least 2 people per 10,000 people die each day
    - In the two counties of South Sudan where famine was declared in February 2017, which have a combined population of 193,000 people, approximately 39 people are dying every day.
  - At least 20 percent of the population lacks access to enough food
  - More than 30 percent of children are acutely malnourished
    - Acute malnutrition is more likely to be fatal to children under 5 than to older children or adults. During a famine, 3 in 10 young children—or even more—are not get-

ting enough calories and nutrients. Their weakened immune systems make them more vulnerable to deadly infections.

- When an area is declared a famine zone, this means that many people are already not getting enough food, people have already died and continue to die, and the children who survive are not getting the right nutrition and are in danger of suffering short-term and long-term damage from acute malnutrition.

## Risks of malnutrition are intensified by famine

When pregnant women and children younger than 2 live in famine conditions, they are at even greater risk of the short-term consequences (acute malnutrition and death) and the long-term consequences (stunting, disease, and poverty) of early childhood malnutrition than in less dire situations.

- Maternal and child nutrition is critical at any time for mothers and babies to survive and thrive.

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- In famine, the extreme lack of access to food, much less to nutritious food, means that these needs are even less likely to be met.
- Acute malnutrition and stunting (chronic malnutrition) are caused by the same circumstances. Nutrition for pregnant women and children is of utmost importance to prevent each of these conditions, but these groups are at even greater risk during famines.
- In any context, but especially during famines, there are dual solutions to malnutrition: prevention and treatment for the long-term needs and the short-term needs of vulnerable people. A focus on both is essential.
- Acute malnutrition has long-term consequences even for those who survive episodes of it.
- Such episodes have been shown to damage children's growth and development,<sup>v</sup> and therefore are associated with poor health and economic outcomes at individual and community levels.

## Stunting

- When children are chronically malnourished during the 1,000-day window between pregnancy and the second birthday, they become stunted. Not only are they far too short for their age, but they have lifelong health problems and are often less productive in the workplace, both of which also lead to negative effects on the larger economy.<sup>vi</sup>
- Stunting is irreversible and is largely caused by inadequate nutrition and poor health during this 1,000-day window.
- Many people who are affected by famine are in one of these phases of their lives—pregnant women, babies, and toddlers. This time window is the most important to make sure women and young children get the right nutrition to prevent stunting.

## Acute malnutrition

- Acute malnutrition, also known as wasting, means that children weigh far too little for their height. It means that children, who are the most affected by acute malnutrition, have not received enough food to eat, especially food with the right nutrients, and/or that children have suffered from infections or other illnesses.
- Children can suffer from acute malnutrition at any time, especially when there is food insecurity or poor health, but these risks are even greater in famines.
- Between one-third and one-half of children who suffer from severe acute malnutrition will die of it.<sup>iv</sup> Thus, the most immediate concern when children are acutely malnourished is the risk of death.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56223#.WPZDxmnydsU>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-detail-forms/ipcinfo-resource-detail0/en/c/178965/>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC\\_Famine\\_Def\\_Meas.pdf](http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Def_Meas.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/severe\\_malnutrition/en/](http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/severe_malnutrition/en/)

<sup>v</sup> WHO (2014). Global nutrition targets 2025: Wasting policy brief. Accessed at [http://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/globaltargets2025\\_policybrief\\_wasting/en/](http://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/globaltargets2025_policybrief_wasting/en/).

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.