

Recognizing Signs of Malnutrition

Malnutrition is a serious condition that can keep a child from developing properly and reaching his or her full potential. Our goal as leaders and ministering brothers and sisters is to teach families how to know if their child is malnourished and how to identify steps they can take to help their child.

KEY POINTS

- **Malnutrition can have severe consequences** on children’s health, physical and mental development, and overall well-being. In severe cases, malnutrition can become a life-threatening condition.
- **Detecting and addressing signs of malnutrition** can save a child’s life and enhance his or her potential.
- **It is not always obvious when a child is malnourished.** In some places, the symptoms of malnutrition are so common that they may seem normal. Learning common signs of malnutrition can help discover it.
- **Parents are key in helping a child who is malnourished.** Once they become informed, they can take the necessary steps to improve their child’s nutrition. Others may assist and teach parents in these efforts.
- **Professionals and volunteers can use measurements** to determine if the child’s growth and weight are normal for his or her age and height. Professionals can also use other assessments to determine level of malnutrition.
- **A child who shows signs of malnutrition should be seen by a health professional** who can determine if the child is malnourished and inform parents about what the child needs to recover.
- **It is also important to consider that a malnourished child will have a weakened immune system** that will make him or her more prone to diseases. These diseases can also affect how his or her body absorbs and uses nutrients, making malnutrition worse. Treating malnutrition will help end this vicious cycle.
- **Stunting** is caused by chronic or persistent malnutrition that slows normal growth and development, especially during the first years of life, resulting in stunted growth and reduced mental ability. These children are too short for their age.
- **Wasting** is an acute malnutrition or a sudden weight loss that leads the body to break down its own muscle for energy. A wasted child is too thin for his or her height. This form of malnutrition is associated with increased risk of death. Treatment is required immediately.



Become familiar with the information in the “Recognizing Signs of Malnutrition” one-page handout for families.

Questions to Prayerfully Consider

- How prevalent is malnutrition in my area?
- If I notice that a child has signs of malnutrition, how can I help?
- If parents in my area have a child with signs of malnutrition, where can they go to get help from a medical professional or certified nutritionist?



Inspiration from Church Leaders

“Jesus was perceptive, and so are you. We can only know the true needs of our children if we perceive them. We must listen, observe and see” (Rebecca L. Craven, in “Child Nutrition Program Helps Hundreds of Children and Mothers in the Philippines,” Sept. 21, 2022, newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).

THINGS WE CAN DO

Consider these ideas and others as you counsel together and pray for guidance.

Leaders

- Be mindful of what parents may be facing. They may feel hopeless about getting the right food or not having the resources to feed their children. Be sensitive to those feelings, and show love, kindness, compassion, and a sincere desire to support them. Always look for the guidance of the Holy Ghost to guide these efforts.
- Organize workshops to teach parents how to recognize common signs of malnutrition in children. Be careful not to embarrass or point out a certain child or family in front of others.
- Identify nutrition or health screenings available locally.
- Help parents get the medical attention needed for their child. Every malnourished child should receive medical attention. If a family cannot afford it, the bishop may consider using fast offering funds.
- Where medical professionals are not available locally, counsel with stake and area leaders to see what resources may be available through the Church.
- The Relief Society presidency may consider hosting lessons for parents in their ward on what children should eat to prevent malnutrition. See the Unit Leader Guide “Healthy Eating for Children”.
- If you have a serious concern about a child, pray and counsel with other leaders in your ward or stake to know what to do to help him or her.

Ministering Brothers and Sisters

- When appropriate, teach the signs of malnutrition while ministering to families.
- Observe circumstances to learn the needs of families. Report needs to elders quorum and Relief Society presidents.
- Share other resources with parents, such as the “Healthy Eating for Children” handout.

Recognizing Signs of Malnutrition

Share this handout with members of your stake and ward. It provides useful information and suggestions for families.

Recognizing Signs of Malnutrition

- Malnutrition can severely affect your child's health and development.
- Detecting and addressing signs of malnutrition can save a child's life and enhance his or her potential.
- This document addresses two forms of malnutrition: wasting and stunting.

SIGNS OF MALNUTRITION:

Review the signs of malnutrition below to become familiar with what to watch for in your child. These signs do not represent every sign that may occur, and different children could present different signs.

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ENERGY <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of energy• Dizziness• Weakness | APPEARANCE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dry, brittle hair, lightening of color, hair loss• Sunken eyes, hollow cheeks• Swollen, bleeding gums• Decaying teeth• Swollen abdomen, small legs and arms• Numbness and swelling in hands and feet• Dry, scaly skin, bruising easily, swelling under the skin (edema) |
| BODY'S DEFENSE SYSTEM <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequently ill• Frequent diarrhea• Slow wound healing• Long recovery times | APPETITE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduced appetite• Lack of interest in food and drink |
| CONCENTRATION AND MOOD <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty concentrating• Slow to react• Easily irritated | |

Take the Next Steps

It is not always easy to detect if a child is malnourished. They can look like other children in the area. If you believe your child could be malnourished:

- **Consult with a health professional.** A professional can determine your child's nutritional status and provide additional guidance.
- **Meet with your Relief Society or Elders Quorum president to ask for guidance and help if needed.** They can support you and help you find resources from the community and the Church to meet the nutritional needs of your child.

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

LEARN MORE

Learn more about recognizing signs of malnutrition and other ways to improve child nutrition:

ChildNutrition.ChurchofJesusChrist.org

