



Malnutrition and Kids

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When my adopted little brother first came to our home, he was suffering from malnutrition. There is a period of time in our family photos where you can tell he is recently adopted because his limbs are so small and weak. There is another period shortly afterward where you can see him grow and gain strength because my family got into the habit of feeding him every time he so much as whimpered.

My brother was lucky because he got into a situation where he was able to be fed and be fed properly. He was able to gain his strength back and he does not suffer from any long-term consequences of this early malnourishment. Many children are not so lucky.

“Undernutrition is one of the most important public health problems, affecting more than 900 million individuals around the World.” (Martins, et. al.) It’s estimated that undernutrition is responsible for 3.5 million deaths under the age of five worldwide.

Undernutrition doesn’t just mean “not getting enough food.” It also covers when the food that is received is not high enough in the nutrients needed by the body to thrive and even support itself, which is a common epidemic for poorer people the world over, including in developed nations. Cheaper food is often not high in nutrients, but it is food. It gets eaten so that the children don’t starve to death, but undernutrition leads to its own problems.

35% of disease in children under five is caused by undernutrition. Stunting, low weight, and low birth weight together make up 21% of what is called “disability adjusted life years” or DALY, each one of which is the same as one lost year of life. With such high numbers, it is clearly important to ensure children get the nutrients they need.

There is, in America, a concern about obesity in children, so how can these kids be undernourished? In fact, when kids don’t get the nutrients they need early on, it leads to later being more likely to become obese. The body needs some degree of fat, and it will learn to pick that up where it can. Later on though, it will start picking

up too much fat, and food that is cheap but low in nutrients doesn't help that, as so much of that kind of food is also high in fat-causing ingredients.

When people are poor or homeless, they must do what they need just to get by. They can't afford to buy nice, expensive food when they are struggling just to get or keep a roof over their heads. This, unfortunately, leads to purchasing the cheap, low-nutrient food mentioned throughout this article.

Children need food that contains all the nutrients they need to grow, or they develop serious problems. Long-term, this leads to many health consequences, like obesity, and disability. Some of these consequences are even epigenetic, which means they can be permanently embedded in the person and then passed down to their own children.

But there is hope. In most cases, children who are able to recover eventually grow back to normal weight and height consistent with their classmates. And children who regain the proper weight and height have been shown to not have those long-term consequences. But this is most successful when the child recovers before the age of six, which means we as a people need to ensure kids are getting the nutrients they need.

Children are innocent and very vulnerable to consequences when they don't get what they need. It's important to come together and make sure they get proper food.

Cited:

Martins, Vinicius J B et al. "Long-lasting effects of undernutrition" *International journal of environmental research and public health* vol. 8,6 (2011): 1817-46.