

SANCHAR briefs

Science And News: Communicating Health And Research

Brief #6: Wasting

Childhood wasting, or low weight for height, is an internationally used measure of severe malnutrition, and is critically associated with mortality among children under five years of age. Studies have shown severely wasted children are, on average, 11 times more likely to die than their healthy counterparts. Over 50 million children under 5 years old are wasted, with 17 million of those estimated to be severely wasted. Globally, wasting accounts for 4.7% of all deaths of children aged under 5 years.

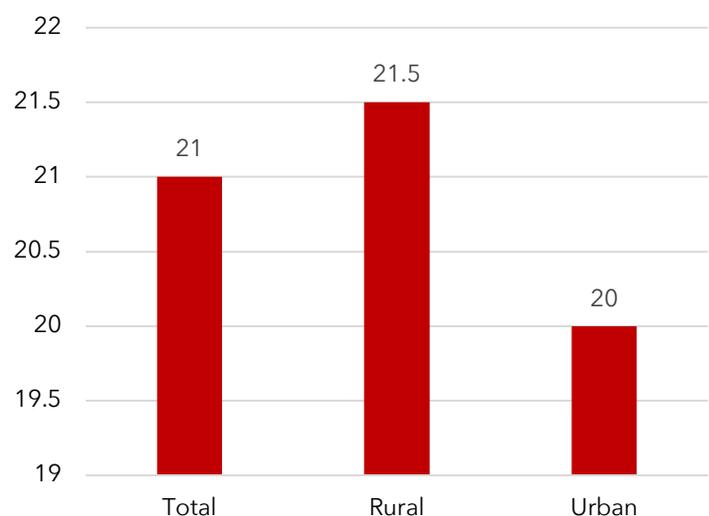
Between National Family Health Survey in 2005-06 and 2015-16, while the prevalence of stunting among children under 5 years has declined from 48% to 38.4%, the prevalence of wasting in the same group has increased from 19.8% to 21%. Paradoxically, this increase in the burden of wasting has come at a time of rapid economic growth. Furthermore, in most parts of the world, wasting is associated with acute starvation, and stands at below 5% in the absence of any food shortage crisis. However with 21% wasted children around the year, India is among the few countries where wasting has become a chronic condition.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) has historically implemented the Integrated Child Development Scheme, the world's largest community-based program to target maternal and child malnutrition through *anganwadis*. As a practice, the *anganwadi* worker tracks anthropometric measures including the weight for age, on a growth chart. Alongside this, since 2018, a new comprehensive National Nutrition Policy was rolled out as the POSHAN Abhiyaan under MWCD to integrate nutrition targets including stunting, anemia, Infant and Young child feeding practices, Immunization, De-worming and Food Fortification, among others. While wasting is not a target area outlined under this policy like stunting, the policy aims to reduce under-nutrition and related problems.

Quick Facts from NFHS-4 (2015-16)

1. 21% of children under age 5 are wasted.
2. Prevalence of wasting has increased from 19.8% to 21%, between 2005-06 to 2015-16.
3. Jharkhand has highest levels of wasting (29%)

Rates of wasting (%) v/s place of residence



WHO Guidelines:

- WHO defines severe wasting as the girth of a child's mid-upper arm circumference of less than 115 mm. This is an indication of severe acute malnutrition. Moderate acute malnutrition is defined as moderate wasting, or the girth of a child's mid-upper arm circumference between 115-125 mm.
- In 2012 the World Health Assembly Resolution 65.6 endorsed a Comprehensive implementation plan on maternal, infant and young child nutrition. This targets reducing and maintaining childhood wasting to less than 5% by 2025.

The NFHS 4 concluded that children born to mothers with a Body Mass Index of less than 18.5 kg/m² are more likely to be stunted, wasted, and underweight than children born to mothers with a normal BMI or children whose mothers are overweight/obese. Thus, social and economical conditions strongly inform and predict wasting. Children become wasted when they lose weight rapidly, due to inadequate food or a disease. This is indicative of inadequate access to healthcare, poor feeding and food security and exposure to poor sanitary conditions.

How can this inform your work?

The increase in wasting is a worrying trend that merits the attention of journalists covering nutrition and social policy in India. Wasting is also a critical part of the World Health Assembly's 2025 goals on nutrition, and warrants focused writing of health reporters watching the space.

Reference:

International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India*. Mumbai: IIPS.

Project SANCHAR is aimed at building capacity and facilitating the adoption of practices to use or draw on evidence in public health communication and practice. To facilitate this, SANCHAR collates and provides data from scientifically validated sources, from national datasets in easily interpretable formats, and accessible visuals that can be downloaded easily.



HARVARD
T.H. CHAN

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
India Research Center