

Working Together for a Better Future in Uganda

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Fighting Malnutrition: A Call to Action for Faith Leaders

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Your congregation looks to you, not just for spiritual guidance, but also for practical advice on how to lead their lives. Today in Uganda, almost one-third of children are malnourished. Your community needs your help to overcome malnutrition. In Uganda, malnutrition can be seen in many ways. Malnourished children may be shorter than healthy children their age because long-term malnutrition hurt their growth, or they may be too thin because of severe, short-term malnutrition, or they may be both short and thin. Malnutrition starts early - even babies in the womb can become malnourished if their mother is not able to eat well before and during pregnancy. Young children are at great risk and malnutrition in childhood can affect a child's entire life.

Why does this matter?

- Malnourished children are more likely to get sick and die than healthy children. Almost half of child deaths in Uganda are because of malnutrition.^{2,3}
- Because malnourished children get sick more often, parents miss more days of work and have more of their income going toward medicine and doctor's bills than those of healthy children.^{2,3}
- Malnourished children are more likely to develop diseases later in life such as diabetes and heart disease.²
- Malnutrition slows growth and brain development, lowering intelligence, and making it harder for children to succeed.^{2,3,4,5}
- Malnourished children under 2 years learn to sit, stand, and walk later than their well-nourished peers. Malnourished children enrol in school later, have more days out of school due to illnesses, perform worse in school, and complete fewer years of schooling. Because of this, adults who were malnourished as children earn less money compared to those who were well-nourished and better-educated as children.^{2,3,4,5}



Photo credit: Basil Safi, Photoshare, 2005

What Are So Many Ugandans Malnourished?

- Many do not eat a wide enough variety of foods to provide all the nutrition their body needs.
- Some do not eat enough food or enough times a day to meet their body's needs.
- Illnesses such as diarrhoea that do not allow food to be absorbed and used by the body can also cause malnutrition.
- How women and children are cared for can contribute to malnutrition, including feeding and health care.
- On average, Ugandan women give birth to 5 children, often close together, not giving the mother's body enough time to recover, and build enough nutrients for another pregnancy.¹
- Giving birth begins early in Uganda. More than half of adolescent girls have given birth or are pregnant by 19. This causes serious problems because children born to very young mothers are at increased risk of illness and death.¹
- Four of 10 women in Uganda do not make the 4 recommended visits to health facilities while pregnant where support is given for the health and nutrition of both mother and baby.¹

What Should I Tell My Congregation?

- Those most at risk of malnutrition are adolescents, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children under 2. Every family member has a responsibility to ensure the nutritional needs of these vulnerable groups are met.
- We must improve the nutritional status of our adolescent girls, and delay first pregnancy past the age of 19. This will have a huge impact on improving child nutrition and survival.
- Make sure children are born at least 2 years apart, which will improve the health of mothers and babies.
- A pregnant woman should visit a health facility as soon as she knows she is pregnant and eat a healthy diet with at least one extra meal a day. This includes fruits and vegetables of different colours, and eggs, fish, and/or meat once a day when possible. Use iodized salt for the baby's brain to grow properly.
- Breast milk is the best food for a baby during the first 6 months of life and is all that is needed for a baby to grow and develop. It is important that women are given support to breastfeed their baby. This means other family members need to help her with chores and ensure she is eating a wide variety of foods.
- At 6 months, breast milk alone is not enough for infants. They should also start to eat semi-solid foods rich in nutrients and protein 2-4 times a day, depending on age, and given a small snack as needed while continuing to breastfeed. By 12 months a baby needs 3 meals and 3 small nutritious snacks a day in addition to continued breastfeeding.
- All households should use a latrine, and treated drinking water that is stored in a covered container for preparing meals. All family members should wash their hands with soap under poured/flowing water after handling soiled nappies, using the latrine, and before preparing or serving food.
- If you grow food or raise animals to sell, first keep enough to feed your family, or buy a healthy variety of foods for the family.
- Visit your health centre or talk to your village health team to get more information on the best nutrition for you and your family and to make sure your baby is growing properly.

From birth to 2 years is the time in a child's life when they are most likely to become malnourished. We as a community must do everything we can to ensure that caregivers of young children have the knowledge, time, and resources to make sure our children are well fed and nurtured. This also means that men must respect their partners and make them feel safe and protected.

Suggestions on Addressing Nutrition

You can discuss the importance of making wise choices in families and seeking guidance on the best nutrition for children using these passages:

"Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety." Proverbs 11:14

"And make not your own hands contribute to your own demise, for the Lord loves the actions of good." Quran 2:195

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body." 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

"Eat of the good things which have been provided for you... Eat of what is lawful and wholesome on the earth." Quran 2:173, 168

