**Young children’s diets show no improvement in last decade, ‘could get much worse’ under COVID-19**

*During crucial period when children begin to transition to solid foods, just 1 in 3 are fed a diet diverse enough to grow well*

**NEW YORK, 22 September 2021** **–** Children under the age of 2 are not getting the food or nutrients they need to thrive and grow well, leading to irreversible developmental harm, according to a new report released by UNICEF today.

[*Fed to Fail? The crisis of children’s diets in early life*](https://www.unicef.org/reports/fed-to-fail-child-nutrition)– released ahead of the [UN Food Systems Summit](https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit) this week – warns that rising poverty, inequality, conflict, climate-related disasters, and health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are contributing to an ongoing nutrition crisis among the world’s youngest that has shown little sign of improvement in the last ten years.

“The report’s findings are clear: When the stakes are highest, millions of young children are being fed to fail,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. “Poor nutritional intake in the first two years of life can irreversibly harm children’s rapidly growing bodies and brains, impacting their schooling, job prospects and futures. While we have known this for years, there has been little progress on providing the right kind of nutritious and safe foods for the young. In fact, the ongoing COVID-19 disruptions could make the situation much worse.”

In an analysis of 91 countries, the report finds that only half of children aged 6-23 months are being fed the minimum recommended number of meals a day, while just a third consume the minimum number of food groups they need to thrive. Further analysis of 50 countries with available trend data reveals these poor feeding patterns have persisted throughout the last decade.

As COVID-19 continues to disrupt essential services and drives more families into poverty, the report finds that the pandemic is affecting how families feed their children. For example, a survey conducted among urban households in Jakarta found that half of families have been forced to reduce nutritious food purchases. As a result, the percentage of children consuming the minimum recommended number of food groups fell by a third in 2020, compared to 2018.

Children carry the scars of poor diets and feeding practices for life. An insufficient intake of nutrients found in vegetables, fruits, eggs, fish and meat needed to support growth at an early age puts children at risk of poor brain development, weak learning, low immunity, increased infections and, potentially, death.

Children under the age of two are most vulnerable to all forms of malnutrition – stunting, wasting, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity – as a result of poor diets, due to their greater need for essential nutrients per kilogram of body weight than at any other time in life.

Globally, UNICEF estimates that more than half of children under the age of 5 with wasting – around 23 million children – are younger than 2 years of age, while the prevalence of stunting increases rapidly between 6 months and two years, as children’s diets fail to keep pace with their growing nutritional needs.

According to the report, children aged 6-23 months living in rural areas or from poorer households are significantly more likely to be fed poor diets compared to their urban or wealthier peers. In 2020, for example, the proportion of children fed the minimum number of recommended food groups was twice as high in urban areas (39 per cent) than in rural areas (23 per cent).

To deliver nutritious, safe, and affordable diets to every child, the report calls for governments, donors, civil society organizations and development actors to work hand-in-hand to transform food, health and social protection systems by leading key actions, including:

* Increasing the availability and affordability of nutritious foods – including fruits, vegetables, eggs, fish meat and fortified foods – by incentivizing their production, distribution and retailing.
* Implementing national standards and legislation to protect young children from unhealthy processed and ultra-processed foods and beverages, and to end harmful marketing practices targeting children and families.
* Increasing the desirability of nutritious and safe foods through multiple communication channels including digital media to reach parents and children with easy to understand, coherent information.