

Family Friendly Factsheet

Malnutrition



What is Malnutrition?

Malnutrition occurs when a person does not eat the correct balance of nutrients needed to maintain good health. Usually malnutrition takes the form of under nutrition when a person eats insufficient food or if they are eating a poor diet low in calories. However, malnutrition can also occur in people who are overweight or obese. A diet high in fat, sugar and salt can lead to an excessive intake of calories (known as over nutrition) but also a reduction in other important nutrients leading to deficiencies in key vitamins and minerals. Anyone can become malnourished if over a prolonged period of time they do not eat enough food or eat an unhealthy diet.

Under Nutrition

Under nutrition arises from the deficiency of one or more nutrients. Under nutrition is assessed in terms of degrees of weight loss in adults, whilst in children height and weight are used and compared with reference growth charts. Under nutrition may be due to a number of factors including a decreased dietary intake, increased nutritional requirements or increased losses and an impaired ability to absorb or utilise nutrients.

Under nutrition occurs when there is a deficiency of one or more nutrients and can be mild or severe. Severe under nutrition is rare in developed countries like the UK but can be common in some developing countries such as Africa and India. In the UK more common under nutrition related diseases include iron, calcium and folate deficiencies. These deficiencies are particularly common in girls and women of child bearing age.

Effects of under nutrition

The body may adapt to a short period of under nutrition. Some nutrients such as fat-soluble vitamins are stored in the body and stores can be used up if the diet does not provide enough. There is also evidence that people become more efficient at absorbing and using some nutrients if they have low intakes. However, under nutrition can negatively affect every system of the body and, after a while, signs of a poor diet may start to

appear, e.g. the person may become more prone to infections.

Weight loss is an obvious sign of a diet too low in energy. Children who do not meet their needs for energy may stop gaining weight and stop growing and consequently become less active to conserve energy stores.

Over nutrition

Over nutrition is when nutrients are over supplied to the body in relation to the amounts required for normal growth, development and metabolism. Obesity is a form of malnutrition as more calories than required are supplied to the body. However as previously mentioned people who are overweight or obese often eat a diet high in fat, sugar and salt which can lead to a reduction in other key vitamins and minerals needed to maintain good health.

Effects of over nutrition

Being overweight and obese is linked to many diet related illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, high blood pressure, gallstones, depression and some cancers. A healthy weight, a balanced diet and 60 minutes of activity each day for children (and 30 minutes for adults) can help reduce the risk of these illnesses.

Causes of over nutrition

Over nutrition is caused primarily by lifestyle choices which an individual takes. Eating a diet which consists of foods high in fat, sugar and salt can lead to weight gain and result in insufficient intakes of other vital nutrients. A lack of physical activity can also lead to an increase in weight gain.

To ensure optimum nutrition, base your diet on whole meal starchy carbohydrates such as breads, potatoes, pasta and rice, eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, eat lean meats, fish and lentils and pulses and low fat dairy foods. It is important to remember not to ban fatty and sugary foods from the diet but remember to eat them in moderation and eat more of some foods and less of others.

If you are worried about your child's weight or health please see your GP.