

Stunted Growth: Causes, Symptoms & Prevention

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Introduction

Stunting is known for impaired growth and development in children. It is caused due to poor nutrition, recurring infections and reduction in psychosocial stimuli. It is also a primary indication of malnutrition, diarrhoea, helminthiasis in early childhood. Malnutrition during foetal growth of the child is caused by an undernourished mother. Stunted growth in children is defined as if the height for specific age in children exceeded two standard deviations of the WHO Child Growth Standards Median.

In Children, Stunting in the first 1000 days from conception impairs growth and has adverse effect on the functional development of the child. The consequences of stunting include poor cognition and academic performance, loss of productivity, excess weight gain later in childhood and increase in risk of nutrition-related chronic diseases during adulthood. As per the United Nations agencies 2020, reports about 149 million children less than five years were affected by this condition worldwide. It is nearly 22% of children around the globe were affected by this condition. In many children, this decreases their chance to achieve full ability before they reach the school stage. Stunted children might never regain the regular height with equivalent bodyweight.

Causes of Stunting

The causes of stunting are mostly related to the causes of malnutrition in children. The three main causes of stunted growth are poor feeding habits, poor maternal nutrition, and inadequate sanitation and other causes include family history of stunted or delayed growth, Growth hormone deficiency, Hypothyroidism. Stress, use of certain medications during pregnancy, anaemia, kidney or lung diseases are a few contributing factors for stunted growth in children.

Health Effects of Stunted Growth

The impact created by stunted growth in children is short stature and other effects include High risk of illness and premature death, Delayed mental and cognitive development resulting in poor school performance and later reduced work productivity is also observed. Intergenerational cycle of malnutrition is observed in Stunted growth. Impaired cognitive capacity will create a major problem during adult stage.

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Diagnosis

Diagnosis of Stunted growth is done by comparing children height to the growth reference standards, WHO 2006. Children under fifth percentile of reference height for specified age are categorised as stunted. The measurement that is lower than the fifth percentile refers to less than two standard deviations of the WHO Child Growth Standards Median.

Prevention

The main goal of UN agencies, government, NGOs is to prevent stunting. It is achieved by focusing on providing proper nutrition during the first 1000 days of a child's life which includes two years of child's age from conception because in this stage the brain of the child develops rapidly laying a strong foundation in cognitive and social skills for future. It is also the time when the children are at higher risk of infections which lead to diarrhoea and other disorders, which might affect the child's growth and development.

Providing optimal nutrition for pregnant and lactating mothers are important. Lactating mothers are to be encouraged in breastfeeding babies for at least first 6 months, These preventive measures are considered the pillars to prevent stunting. Introducing proper weaning practice after 6 months of age together with breastfeeding until two years of age is essential.