

- It is easier to prevent a child from slipping into malnutrition than to reverse it once it is severely underweight. Hence, the focus should be on counselling every family with a young child below one year of age, because it is this time, especially in the age of 6 to 18 months that most children become malnourished.

Recognising Malnutrition

It is difficult to recognise malnutrition just by looking at a child. Only very severe cases would show obvious signs of weakness or wasting by which time it is too late. Most children look normal but their height and weight when measured is less than expected for their age. It is therefore essential to weigh every child monthly, so as to detect malnutrition in time. Depending on the weight the child can be classified as mild, moderate or severely underweight.

Sick children need special attention. However, families of all children especially children below two should be counselled on feeding the child so as to prevent malnutrition.



Six Important Messages for Preventing Child Malnutrition

1. **Exclusive Breastfeeding:** Till the age of six months, give only breast milk; not even water should be added.
2. **Complementary Feeding:** At the age of six months, add other foods. Breastfeeding alone is not enough, though it is good to continue breastfeeding for at least one to two years more. There are five things to remember about complementary feeding:
 - (i) **Consistency:** Initially the food has to be soft and mashed. But later, anything that adults eat can be given to the child, with less spices. Do not dilute food. Keep it as thick as possible, for e.g. 'give daal not daal ka pani'.
 - (ii) **Quantity:** Gradually increase the amount of such foods. Till at about one year, the child gets almost half as much nutrition as the mother.
 - (iii) **Frequency:** The amount of complementary foods given should be equal to about half what the adult needs in terms of nutrients. But since the child's stomach is small, this amount has to be distributed into **four to five, even six feeds per day**.
 - (iv) **Density:** The food also has to be energy dense, low in volume, high in energy, therefore, **add some oil or fats to the food**. Family could add a spoon of it to every roti/every meal. Whatever edible oil is available in the house is sufficient.
 - (v) **Variety:** Add protective foods – green leafy vegetables. The rule is that the greener it is, or the more red it is the more its protective quality. Similarly meat, eggs, fish are liked by children and very nutritive and protective.
3. **Feeding during the illness:** Give as much as the child will take; do not reduce the quantity of food. After the illness, to catch up with growth, add an extra-feed. Recurrent illness is a major cause of malnutrition.

