

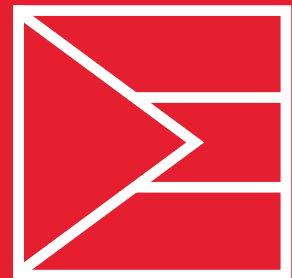
# Child Malnutrition in Gaza

March 2024



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London | Washington



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# Child Malnutrition in Gaza: At A Glance



01

# Child Malnutrition in Gaza: At A Glance

100%

of Gaza's population is now food insecure  
*Source: The Telegraph*



1 in 6

children under two years of age acutely malnourished  
*Source: BBC*



Less than  
1 litre

of safe water per person per day  
*Source: UNICEF*

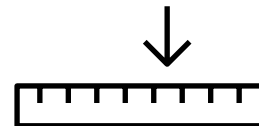


124,500

young children living in food poverty before 7 October  
*Source: Global Nutrition Cluster*

90%

of children under the age of two face severe food poverty  
*Source: WHO*



30,000

children under the age of five estimated to be stunted before 7 October  
*Source: Global Nutrition Cluster*

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# Child Malnutrition in Gaza Prior to 7 October



02

# Child Malnutrition in Gaza Prior to 7 October

Israel's blockade and siege of Gaza have resulted in high levels of child malnutrition since the 2000s. This is partially due to the high unemployment caused by the siege, which has left families impoverished and reliant on aid to survive.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the current conflict, 64% of households in the Gaza Strip were food insecure or vulnerable to food insecurity, with 124,500 young children living in food poverty.<sup>2</sup>

30,000 children under the age of five in Gaza were estimated to be stunted prior to 7 October 2023 (a key indicator of protracted undernutrition). These stunted children may never attain their full potential in terms of physical growth, cognitive capacity, school performance and productivity later in life.<sup>3</sup>

However, before 7 October 2023, severe or life-threatening wasting in the Gaza Strip was far lower, with just 0.8 per cent of children under the age of five acutely malnourished. Half of these children were in need of life-saving treatment.<sup>4</sup>



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# Child Malnutrition in Gaza Since 7 October



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03

# Child Malnutrition in Gaza Since 7 October

*“If a child is malnourished, particularly under two years of age, they are unable to cognitively catch up with other [children]. The brain is such a big part of caloric and nutrient consumption in a child’s development.”*

Anuradha Narayan, Senior Nutrition Adviser, Unicef

Since 7 October 2023, 100% of Gaza’s population has become food insecure due to Israel’s blockade on humanitarian aid from entering Gaza, Israel’s bombing of bakeries, fishing boats, and arable land, and fuel shortages which prevent aid being transported to northern Gaza.

Of those facing food insecurity, at least half a million are estimated to be facing ‘catastrophic conditions’ – the highest classified level of acute food insecurity – in which people experience “extreme food gaps and collapse of their livelihood”.<sup>34</sup> Pregnant women and children are most likely to experience malnutrition.<sup>5</sup>

Toddlers and babies are most at risk when experiencing malnutrition as they are especially dependent on food and nutrition to fuel their nascent physical and mental development.<sup>35</sup> “If a child is malnourished, particularly under two years of age, they are unable to cognitively catch up with other [children]. The brain is such a big part of caloric and nutrient consumption in a child’s development,” said Anuradha Narayan, a senior nutrition adviser at Unicef.<sup>36</sup>

Malnourished children are also more susceptible to disease, as nutritional deficiency exhausts the immune system.<sup>37</sup>

Inadequate safe drinking water, as well as insufficient water for cooking and hygiene purposes, are compounding poor nutrition.<sup>6</sup> On average, households surveyed had access to less than one litre of safe water per person per day.<sup>7</sup> According to humanitarian standards, the minimum amount of safe water needed in an emergency is 3 litres per person per day, while the overall standard is 15 litres per person.<sup>8</sup>

Child malnutrition is also compounded by Israel’s bombing of hospitals, and fuel, food, staff, and medical shortages at the remaining operational hospitals, which render doctors unable to help starving children, especially newborns.<sup>33</sup>

According to the UN, food delivery programmes in Gaza only met 25 percent of the nutritional needs for malnourished children and vulnerable mothers from January to March 2024, leaving 375,000 individuals vulnerable.<sup>38</sup>



## Child Malnutrition in Gaza Since 7 October continued...

### Northern Gaza

United Nations organisations said that child malnutrition levels in northern Gaza were “particularly extreme” and about three times higher than in the south of the Palestinian enclave where more aid has been available.<sup>9</sup>

Malnutrition screenings carried out by UN agencies in northern Gaza in January found that one in six children under two years of age was acutely malnourished.<sup>10</sup> Of those children, almost 3% were suffering from severe wasting and requiring urgent treatment.<sup>11</sup> As the data were collected in January, the situation is likely to be even graver today.<sup>12</sup>

### Central Gaza

Project Hope, a humanitarian group operating a clinic in Deir el-Balah in central Gaza, has said that 21 percent of the pregnant women and 11 percent of the children under the age of five it has treated in the last three weeks are suffering from malnutrition.<sup>13</sup>

### Southern Gaza

In Rafah, where aid has been more available, found 5 per cent of children under the age of two years are acutely malnourished.<sup>14</sup> This is clear evidence that access to humanitarian aid is needed and can help prevent the worst outcomes.<sup>15</sup> It also reinforces agencies’ calls to protect Rafah from the threat of intensified military operations.<sup>16</sup>

### Malnutrition Among Pregnant and Breastfeeding Mothers

The lack of nutritious food, safe water and medical services - as well as exhaustion and trauma caused by the conflict - is also hindering the ability of mothers to breastfeed their babies.<sup>17</sup> Without breast milk or formula - the supplies of which are reported to be almost non-existent in the north - babies can quickly become severely dehydrated and malnourished, which increases the risk of life-threatening conditions like kidney failure.<sup>18</sup>

Palestinian parents continue to arrive at overwhelmed health facilities begging for infant formula for newborns.<sup>19</sup>

### Child Malnutrition Statistics

90 per cent of children under the age of two and 95 per cent of pregnant and breastfeeding women face severe food poverty – meaning they have consumed two or less food groups in the previous day – and the food they do have access to is of the lowest nutritional value.<sup>20</sup>

95 per cent of households are limiting meals and portion sizes, with 64 per cent of households eating only one meal a day.<sup>21</sup>

Over 95 per cent of households said they had restricted the amount of food adults received in order to ensure small children had food to eat.<sup>22</sup>

Civilians have lost on average tens of kilograms of weight, according to relief workers – weight loss which has a much more severe impact on children.<sup>23</sup>

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# Child Deaths from Malnutrition



# Child Deaths from Malnutrition

*“There are babies who died in their mothers’ wombs, and surgeries were performed to remove the dead foetuses... Mothers are not eating because of the conditions we are living in, and this affects the infants... There are causes of many children suffering from dehydration and malnutrition, leading to death.”*

**Dr Muhammad Salha**, Acting Director Al-Awda Hospital, Northern Gaza

At least 18 children died as a result of a lack of food at the overwhelmed Kamal Adwan hospital in the town of Beit Lahia.<sup>24</sup>

At least two children died of malnutrition at al-Shifa hospital in Gaza city in late February 2024, with seven others remaining in critical conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Dr Ahmed al-Kahlot, Kamal Adwan’s director, warned that the child deaths so far reported by the health ministry understated the true scale of the problem.<sup>26</sup> “The number of cases of deaths due to malnutrition began to be counted two weeks ago, so the actual number is much higher than that,” he said.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Muhammad Salha, acting director of Al-Awda Hospital, in northern Gaza, said that pregnant women’s starvation and dehydration has meant, “there are babies who died in their mothers’ wombs, and surgeries were performed to remove the dead foetuses”.<sup>28</sup>

The UNICEF Deputy Executive Director for Humanitarian Action and Supply Operations, Ted Chaiban, has said: “The Gaza Strip is poised to witness an explosion in preventable child deaths which would compound the already unbearable level of child deaths in Gaza.<sup>29</sup> We’ve been warning for weeks that the Gaza Strip is on the brink of a nutrition crisis.<sup>30</sup> If the conflict doesn’t end now, children’s nutrition will continue to plummet, leading to preventable deaths or health issues which will affect the children of Gaza for the rest of their lives and have potential intergenerational consequences”.<sup>31</sup>

The babies of thousands of women “who are due to give birth in the next month in the Gaza Strip are at risk of dying,” according to the UNICEF State of Palestine Humanitarian Situation report.<sup>32</sup>

# Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> ‘Cases of child malnutrition double in Gaza because of blockade’ Clare Dyer (2002) available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1172086/>
- <sup>2-3</sup> ‘Child deaths in the Gaza strip due to disease and malnutrition can and must be prevented’ Global Nutrition Cluster (2024) available at [https://www.nutritioncluster.net/sites/nutritioncluster.com/files/2023-11/SoP%20Nutrition%20Cluster%20advocacy\\_final.pdf](https://www.nutritioncluster.net/sites/nutritioncluster.com/files/2023-11/SoP%20Nutrition%20Cluster%20advocacy_final.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> ‘Children’s lives threatened by rising malnutrition in the Gaza Strip’ World Health Organisation (19 February 2024) available at <https://www.who.int/news/item/19-02-2024-children-s-lives-threatened-by-rising-malnutrition-in-the-gaza-strip>
- <sup>5</sup> ‘Child deaths in the Gaza strip due to disease and malnutrition can and must be prevented’ Global Nutrition Cluster
- <sup>6-8</sup> ‘Children’s lives threatened by rising malnutrition in the Gaza Strip’ UNICEF (20 February 2024) available at <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/gaza-strip-childrens-lives-threatened-rising-malnutrition>
- <sup>9</sup> ‘World Health Organisation: child malnutrition ‘particularly extreme’ in north Gaza’ Reuters (5 March 2024) <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/world-health-organization-malnutrition-particularly-extreme-north-gaza-2024-03-05/>
- <sup>10-12</sup> ‘Father’s plea for starving children in north Gaza after son dies of malnutrition’ BBC News (6 March 2024) available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68483180>
- <sup>13</sup> ‘Six children die of malnutrition in Gaza hospitals: Health Ministry’ Al Jazeera (28 February 2024) available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/28/children-die-of-malnutrition-in-gaza-hospitals-health-ministry>
- <sup>14-16</sup> ‘Children’s lives threatened by rising malnutrition in the Gaza Strip’ World Health Organisation
- <sup>17-18</sup> ‘Father’s plea for starving children in north Gaza after son dies of malnutrition’ BBC News
- <sup>19</sup> ‘Newborns die of hunger and mothers struggle to feed their children as Israel’s siege condemns Gazans to starvation’ CNN (7 March 2024) available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/06/middleeast/israel-gaza-starvation-siege-mothers-babies-intl/index.html>
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- <sup>23</sup> ‘Newborns die of hunger and mothers struggle to feed their children as Israel’s siege condemns Gazans to starvation’ CNN
- <sup>24</sup> ‘Father’s plea for starving children in north Gaza after son dies of malnutrition’ BBC News
- <sup>25</sup> ‘Six children die of malnutrition in Gaza hospitals: Health Ministry’ Al Jazeera
- <sup>26-27</sup> ‘Father’s plea for starving children in north Gaza after son dies of malnutrition’ BBC News

## Footnotes continued...

- 28 ‘Newborns die of hunger and mothers struggle to feed their children as Israel’s siege condemns Gazans to starvation’ *CNN*
- 29-31 ‘Children’s lives threatened by rising malnutrition in the Gaza Strip’ World Health Organisation
- 32 ‘Newborns die of hunger and mothers struggle to feed their children as Israel’s siege condemns Gazans to starvation’ *CNN*
- 33 ‘Children starve to death in Gaza, WHO says, as ceasefire deal sticking points remain’ *CNN* (4 March 2024) available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/04/middleeast/gaza-children-dying-malnutrition-israel-ceasefire-talks-intl-hnk/index.html>
- 34-38 ‘Rising hunger in Gaza ‘turning children into skeletons’ *The Telegraph* (8 January 2024) available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/children-skeletons-rising-hunger-gaza-famine/>