

16 million less children suffered from stunting in 2022 compared to 2012: Global report

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NEW DELHI: There were 16 million fewer stunted children in India in 2022 as compared to 2012, according to the 2023 edition of the 'Joint Malnutrition Estimates' (JME) released by Unicef, WHO and the World Bank. However, wasting clearly remains a concern that needs to be addressed, according to the report on the levels and trends on malnutrition.

Unicef India said that the JME data analysis for India shows that stunting reduced from around 42% to 32% between 2012 and 2022 and India's share in the global burden has declined from 30% to 25%.

Stunting is the result of poor nutrition in utero and during early childhood. Children suffering from stunting may never attain their full possible height and their brains may never develop to their full cognitive potential.

Therefore, dealing with stunting is seen as critical in the fight against malnutrition.

The JME report puts the overall prevalence of stunting in 2022 as per global estimates at 31.7% in case of India which is less than the national estimates of 35.5% (National Family Health Survey-5 2019-21). Stunting declined from 48% in 2006 (NFHS-3), to 38% in 2016 (NFHS- 4) and 35.5% in (NFHS-5). The JME report further reinforces the decline.

However, the JME 2023 report also highlights that wasting in children under five continues to be a challenge and much more efforts are needed to address it. The overall prevalence of wasting in 2022 as per global estimates is 18.7% in India similar to the national estimates of 19% (NFHS-5). India's share in the global burden of wasting is significant at 49%. As per NFHS-4, in 2015-16 there were 21% children in the wasted category and 19.8% in 2005-06. Child wasting is the result of poor nutrient intake and/or recurrent illnesses. Children suffering from wasting have weakened immunity, are susceptible to long-term developmental delays and face an increased risk of death, particularly when wasting is severe. Therefore, there is a need to focus on awareness and access to healthy diets.

Going by the JME data, Unicef concludes that India has shown promising progress when it comes to stunting. It is pointed that the trends are similar to what has been recently seen from the national surveys. In fact, Unicef India highlights that the JME estimates point to a lower prevalence of stunting as compared with national estimates.

According to Unicef India officials, the multi-sectoral responses under Poshan Abhiyaan in 2018 and continued under Poshan 2.0 in 2022 seem to be contributing to the positive shift in the indicators. “We need to further promote the Poshan Jan Andolan, a people’s movement promoting nutrition literacy and supporting families’ healthy eating,” said Arjan de Wagt, chief of nutrition and Unicef India deputy representative, programmes.

Meanwhile, the prevalence of overweight marginally increased in a decade, from 2.2% in 2012 to 2.8% in 2022. In terms of numbers, overweight children rose from 27,52,600 in 2012 (7.7% of the global share) to 31,81,900 in 2022 (8.8% of the global share). However, the overall country classification of India for overweight children is low, and much lower than the global prevalence of 5.6%. The JME data shows that the overall prevalence of overweight in 2022 as per the global estimates is 2.8%, which is less than the national estimates of 3.4% (NFHS-5).

Far from targets

- Only one third of all countries are ‘on track’ to halve the number of children affected by stunting by 2030.
- Fewer countries expected to achieve the 2030 target of 3% prevalence for overweight, with just 1 in 6 countries currently ‘on track’.
- More intensive efforts are required if the world is to achieve the global target of reducing the number of children with stunting to 89 million by 2030.