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## Through the Lunch Lines: The Malnutrition of the Children of the United States of America

We've done it again. We put a new record in the books. Not a record that is to be proud of, but rather one that needs our attention. In March of 2000, the Worldwatch Institute reported, "For the first time in human history, the number of overweight people rivals the number of underweight people. While the world's underfed population has declined slightly since 1980 to 1.1 billion, the number of overweight people has surged to 1.1 billion." Yet, we are Americans. Doesn't this mean our nation doesn't suffer from any malnutrition problems? Wrong. The United States of America is one of the main nations to be blamed for securing this new record for the human race. How can there be such a difference in the two types of malnutrition? In some regions, particularly those of developing countries, there are issues with poverty and hunger because of unequal distribution of resources for food and some gender discrimination. In other regions, mostly the developed countries, there is an overabundance of obese people who suffer because of poor eating habits and the types of food that is offered. It is between these two states of malnutrition that our world suffers from.

So where does the connection lie? How is poverty and obesity associated with one another to create the worldwide problem of malnutrition? The definition of malnutrition reads as "the condition that develops when the body does not get the right amount of the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients it needs to maintain healthy tissues and organ function."

Malnutrition has taken a different swing here in the United States of America. It was stated by the Dr. Joseph F. Smith Medical Library, "In the United States, nutritional deficiencies have generally been replaced by dietary imbalances or excesses associated with many of the leading causes of death and disability. Over nutrition results from eating too much, eating too many of the wrong things, not exercising enough, or taking too many vitamins or other dietary replacements." This statement describes how obesity, a rapidly growing condition of malnutrition, takes affect on the human body.

Who in the United States of America makes up the population classified as malnourished? These people can range anywhere from the elderly folks to the middle aged adults or the teenagers to the infants. Here are some reasons for and statistics regarding malnutrition, specifically in the United States:

- poverty and the lack of food are the primary reason
- ten percent of those living in low income households do not always have enough healthful food to consume, along with their families
- malnutrition affects one in four elderly Americans
- protein-energy malnutrition occurs in fifty percent of surgical patients and in forty eight percent of all other hospital patients

It is a common known fact that the younger population would obviously have a harder time coping with such an environment in that they do not receive the necessary nourishment through the natural vitamins and minerals found in the healthy foods needed for a balanced diet. Where does this leave the children when it comes time to evaluate the United States of America's handle on malnutrition? Are the youth being left out when perhaps they need the most assistance? What will happen if an over abundance of youth die before becoming adults and eventually wipe out a portion of a future generation? Perhaps national leaders should begin to pay more attention to the children of the population and their association with malnourishment as a factor being played out in this new scene of worldwide drama.

Some prying questions that could be asked concerning the potential long-lasting effects of malnourishment on children include: “What is the crucial importance of good nutrition in early childhood? What targeted actions can be taken to address malnourishment among infants and children?”

It is known that infants, young children, and teenagers need additional nutrients to accommodate the needs of their constantly growing and changing bodies. Children in general usually are more vulnerable to malnutrition because they are usually unable to support themselves to get the correct foods necessary to supply their bodies with healthy nutrients. Children who suffer from malnutrition in their early years can suffer from many bodily malfunctions as they age over the years.

Looking closer into the specific area of the United States of America, and the rising rate of obese people, there is an alarming trend of obesity affecting children. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reported, “Nearly thirty three percent tallies the amount of children in the United States that are overweight. This unhealthy weight gain due to a poor diet is responsible for over 300,000 deaths each year. The annual cost to society for obesity is estimated to nearly \$100 billion.”

Child obesity can lead to many risks and complications as a result of the condition. These include: increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, trouble sleeping, breathing problems, and high blood pressure. Many non-physical factors, and more of the mental types of problems can occur as well. Some of these risks include: emotional problems, lower self-esteem, being less popular with their peers, anxiety, and depression.

There are many targeted actions that can be taken to address malnourishment among infants and children. A good starting place to help an obese child would be to schedule an appointment with a physician for the patient to determine the possible cause of the physical disorder. After the diagnosis has been made, the next step and from there on out, it is usually up to the obese patient to make a decision for themselves to engage themselves in more physical activities and exercises, plus they need to concentrate and focus on what they are consuming in their daily diets. A lot of the solution to solving the problem comes from the patient making a decision for themselves to develop a permanent change in their daily habits, one step at a time.

In most cases, obesity affects more than one member of a family. Therefore, it would be wise for decisions to be made as an entire family to assist in the obese members new lifestyles. Making healthier eating choices and regular exercising a family affair can improve the chances of a successful weight control for the child or any other member of the family.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry released a list of a few helpful hints on “Ways to Manage Obesity in Children and Adolescents”. The list is as follows:

- start a weight management program
- change eating habits (eat slowly, develop a routine)
- plan meals and make better food selections (eat less fatty foods, avoid junk and fast foods)
- control portions and consume less calories
- increase physical activity (especially walking) and have more active lifestyle
- know what the child eats at school
- eat meals as a family instead of while watching TV or while at the computer
- do not use food as a reward
- limit snacking
- attend a support group (ex: Weight Watchers, Overeaters Anonymous, etc.)

One of the most challenging places that a child can go to is to their own school. This high-profile, peer pressure full site can be a rigorous setting for a child that may be working towards goals against their personal obesity. School cafeterias are places that are required to offer the federal funded school lunches that meet the defined nutritional standards. As reported by the Institute of Medicine, during each school day, approximately 28 million students participate in the National School Lunch Program. "Schools, school districts, and state educational agencies need to ensure that all meals served or sold in schools are in compliance with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans."

Recently printed in the Des Moines Register was an article declaring the Des Moines School Boards latest act instilled upon the Des Moines school district schools. The students and staff in these buildings are now forbidden to have sweets in their classrooms for certain situations. This is an example of a level of government getting involved and taking action against the rising threat of child obesity.

Kids Health for Parents reported, "Since the 1970s, the percentage of overweight kids and adolescents in the United States has more than doubled. Today, ten percent of two to five year olds and more than fifteen percent of children between the ages of six and nineteen are overweight. If you combine the percent of kids who are overweight with the percent of kids who are at risk of becoming overweight, about one out of three children are affected." This disturbing statistic proves that child obesity has been, and still is on the rise across the United States of America. Why is the United States so deeply affected by this malnourishment problem, unlike any other nation across the world? The American society and culture trends leads the population to engage in habits such as constantly eating on the run -fast foods- and then leaving exercise out of the daily habits. These are the sole two reasons for the malnourishment, particularly obesity in across the United States of America.

What can the national government do to begin helping the affect children and people in general and to prevent the rest of the population from becoming obese as well? Lets take a look back on the United States of America's history and view the last time the nation went through a period of time that portions of the population suffered from malnutrition. Throughout the 1930s, the United States of America endured the worst national depression ever record in history. During this time, the vast majority of the population was poor, out of work, had no money, and lacked enough to eat on a daily basis that became weeks and then became months that soon turned into years. The Great Depression of the United States of America brought malnutrition to the nation. This time, the malnutrition was in form of great poverty due to massive economic problems that had swallowed up the entire country. It took the national government a great period of time to sort things out and try to think of ways to solve the nation's problems.

If the United States of America's national government doesn't start to address the growing problem of malnutrition through obesity soon, the nation will plummet into a hole with a population wasted to the fats. Who can say what the governments will decide to do when eventually dealing with this situation? No one really knows how bad the issue will get, but from the past thirty years' statistics, it looks as if the problem will rapidly get worse as the situation gets farther and farther out of hand. The government may have to dig deep and make some decisions that seem far fetched and fairly radical to actually come close to finding a solution to solve the problem of malnourishment through obesity.

On the North American continent, the United States of America is beginning to really suffer from a malnutrition state called obesity. In the States, the population is steadily falling into the obese trap that has taken so many lives on its own, and has made so many more absolutely miserable. There are so many out there unsure of their condition, and so many others out there working hard towards overcoming their unfortunate circumstance. The following chart, printed by the Institute of Medicine, illustrates the relationship between the number of people in percents by their ages to the time period in which they lived. These relationships only pertain to the United States of America's statistics taken through survey.

(chart found at this website: <http://www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/22/606/0.pdf> )

Obesity is still a fairly new state of malnutrition that is beginning to affect varying parts of the globe when it is compared to the long history of the malnutrition that is known as hunger and poverty. Still, much information is released and is worth storing up. As a human race, our new worldwide record may not be something to be proud of, but yet it is something that deserves a challenge to set new standards for ourselves as a worldwide population. We can strive to do better and give not only our individual bodies, but also the human race as a whole the chance to survive.

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