

# Nutrition needs assessment

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## Key points

- Review pre-crisis data and conduct initial assessment analysis to understand the nutrition status before the crisis as a reference point for assessing the impact of the crisis on nutrition outcomes
- Conduct a rapid nutrition needs assessment at the onset of the emergency to understand the nutrition situation, estimate needs and identify groups with specific needs and/or that have the greatest need for nutritional support
- Collaborate with other sectors such as health, food security, WASH, shelter and protection to ensure joint assessment and to plan on how to address interlinked needs

## 1. Overview

In the context of emergencies, protecting the nutritional status of vulnerable groups becomes paramount to prevent acute malnutrition, diseases, and mortality. Malnutrition stems from a complex interplay of factors beyond just food scarcity, including poor care and feeding practices, limited access to healthcare, and unsafe environments. Children under two years of age are at heightened risk due to feeding difficulties and risks associated with inappropriate feeding practices.

In the first 6 months of a refugee nutrition emergency, conducting a rapid nutrition needs assessment is essential to gather crucial data for response planning. The assessment aims to understand the overall nutrition situation, estimate needs, and identify vulnerable groups at risk of malnutrition. The assessments should be carried out at the various stages of an emergency following standardized guidelines. By identifying acute malnutrition prevalence using MUAC and bilateral edema screenings in children aged 6-59 months, immediate and targeted interventions can be implemented to address their nutritional needs. Additionally, focusing on pregnant and breastfeeding women, as well as children aged 6-23 months, ensures their specific requirements are met during this critical period. Key to the success of the treatment and prevention of

malnutrition interventions is effective coordination and collaboration among all stakeholders involved in these interventions.

## 2. Relevance for emergency operations

Nutrition needs assessment plays a pivotal role in guiding efficient and effective emergency response operations. By quickly identifying the scale and severity of malnutrition within the refugee population, humanitarian teams can allocate resources and prioritize interventions. The data obtained through the assessment informs decision-making, allowing for evidence-based planning and implementation of nutrition interventions. It ensures that vulnerable groups, especially infants and young children, receive timely and appropriate support to prevent and treat malnutrition during emergencies.

## 3. Main guidance

### Emergency Phase

i. Compile pre-crisis information and conduct analysis of initial assessments to establish the nature and likely severity of the nutrition situation.

- Gather information about malnutrition levels and infant and young child feeding practices before the emergency.
- Review what the likely causes of malnutrition are, including immediate, underlying, and basic factors. Consider the displacement crisis as a potential basic cause. Use relevant secondary data obtained from sources such as UNHCR's databases and reports and those of other UN agencies such as UNICEF and WFP, NGOs working in the affected areas, and key informants.
- Gather characteristics and cultural habits of the refugee population that might affect food preference, influence the effectiveness of coping strategies or early interventions.
- Review the results of the assessment carefully and use the findings to construct the pre-assessment situation. This includes the baseline understanding of the nutritional status before the crisis, likely impact of the crisis on nutrition outcomes and vulnerable groups within the population who might be at a higher risk of malnutrition during the crisis. This is useful to inform initial planning.

ii. Primary data collection steps:

- The food security and nutrition checklist under the [Needs assessment for refugee emergencies \(NARE\)](#) multi-sectoral tool, should be used in the first two to three days of the emergency. This should be accompanied or followed by the nutrition screening and infant and young child feeding in emergencies assessment either immediately or within the first two weeks of the emergencies following below.
- Assess the nutrition situation by conducting bilateral oedema screening and mid upper arm circumference (MUAC) screening for all children aged 6-59 months at a reception centre during registration or initial contact. It is also recommended to conduct MUAC screening for pregnant and breastfeeding women, if possible.

- Screen households with an infant younger than 6 months at a reception centre during registration or initial contact using a short questionnaire on feeding practices to determine if the child is facing any breastfeeding difficulties and or is at risk of poor growth and development.
- Conduct focused group discussions (FGD) or key informant interviews (KI) to obtain a general assessment of infant feeding among children aged 6-23 months.
- Ascertain if there are any feeding problems related to breastfeeding, care of non-breastfed infants, and complementary food.
- Determine if infant formula and/or baby bottles/teats have been distributed since the emergency started.
- Identify priorities expressed by parents/caregivers regarding feeding their infants and young children from birth to 2 years of age.

iii. Identify groups with specific needs or that have the greatest need for nutritional support. Engage with communities to identify at-risk groups, paying attention to age, sex, disability, chronic illness, or other factors. (FGDs or KIs)

iv. Review information on the causes of undernutrition from primary or secondary sources, including the community's perceptions and opinions. (Review multisectoral initial reports or liaise with the various multi-sectors to gather information). Use the [conceptual framework of malnutrition](#) as a guide.

v. Assess resource capacity to lead and support the response.

vi. Determine an appropriate response based on an understanding of the context, the emergency, cultural habits among the refugee population and specific refugee vulnerabilities. Consider both prevention and treatment options.

Related risks:

- Inadequate data and assessment may lead to an inaccurate understanding of the nutrition situation and hinder effective response planning.
- Failure to consider cultural habits and preferences may result in ineffective interventions and low community engagement.
- Insufficient attention to specific vulnerable groups may lead to unequal access to nutritional support.
- Inadequate coordination among different sectors may impede the implementation of a comprehensive and efficient response.
- Lack of resources or capacity may limit the scale and effectiveness of the response efforts.

**Presentation of results:** The findings of an initial rapid nutrition assessment should be reported using the Rapid MUAC & IYCF-E screening report template.

## Post emergency phase

As the emergency progresses to the post-emergency phase, continue conducting nutrition assessments and monitoring nutrition indicators to evaluate the impact of interventions.

Collaborate with development partners and local authorities to ensure a smooth transition and sustainable nutrition solutions for the affected population where possible.

## **Nutrition Needs Assessment Checklist**

- Initiate a rapid nutrition needs assessment promptly at the onset of the emergency.
- Use MUAC and bilateral edema screenings to assess acute malnutrition in children aged 6-59 months.
- Focus on pregnant and breastfeeding women, as well as children aged 6-59 months, for specialized nutritional support.
- Collaborate with other sectors to address the underlying causes of malnutrition and improve overall living conditions.

## **Annexes**

[The Sphere Handbook, 2018](#)

[UNHCR, Rapid Nutrition MUAC and IYCF-E assessment report template, 2023](#)

[Global Nutrition cluster/UNICEF/USAID, Nutrition humanitarian needs analysis guidance, 2018](#)

## **4. Links**

[The Sphere Handbook - Food security and nutrition Standardized Expanded Nutrition Survey guidance](#) [Nutrition humanitarian needs analysis guidance](#) [Harmonised Training Package \(HTP\): Resource material for training and learning ...](#)

## **5. Main contacts**

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