

THE IAEA ESTABLISHES PARTNERSHIPS WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO PREVENT MALNUTRITION IN CHILDREN AND OLDER PEOPLE



Regional technical cooperation with stakeholders from Member States in Latin America.

(Photo: E. Cody, IAEA)

The period from conception to 2 years of age — the first thousand days of a child's life — represents a critical window of opportunity for avoiding health risks later in life. The assessment of growth during this crucial period of early vulnerability has traditionally been largely based on anthropometric measurements such as body weight and length, with less attention to the quality of growth and the relative partitioning of nutrients to fat-free mass or fat mass. However, now, the amount and distribution of body fat and the amount and composition of lean mass are understood to be very important for the long term health prospects of infants and children.

Isotope techniques can be used to measure body composition with a high degree of accuracy. This provides governments with key data to enable them to make decisions about national nutrition interventions on the basis of evidence.

The IAEA is working in partnership with international organizations around the world to reduce malnutrition, and, consequently, to alleviate the multitude of preventable diseases caused by poor nutrition.

For example, the IAEA and WHO are working together to develop body composition reference standards from birth to 2 years of age. These standards will help Member States to evaluate their strategies to reduce infant and child undernutrition.

In addition, as part of its efforts to promote better nutrition for infants and children, the IAEA is participating in the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. The IAEA is also part of the International Malnutrition Task Force, which contributes to building capacity in developing countries to fight malnutrition in all its forms.

WHO recommends that infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of their lives, in order to achieve optimal growth, development and health, and that children should continue breastfeeding with nutritious complementary foods up to the age of two years or beyond. The IAEA and WHO Regional Office for Africa are working together through a regional technical cooperation project involving more than 13 countries to use stable isotope methods to evaluate interventions aimed at promoting exclusive breastfeeding.

The IAEA is collaborating with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research through HarvestPlus to use stable isotope techniques to assess the efficacy of biofortification (improving the nutritional content of staple foods) to improve the micronutrient status of populations and contribute to eliminating the hidden hunger of micronutrient deficiency.

At the other end of the age scale, the IAEA and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO)/WHO are collaborating in a regional IAEA technical cooperation project to help Member States in Latin America to use stable isotope techniques for the early diagnosis of sarcopenia in the elderly. Sarcopenia refers to the loss of muscle mass and strength that affects the aged.

By bringing together diverse agencies and institutions that share the same goal — promoting nutrition for better health — inter-agency partnerships will continue to prove effective in minimizing the many health problems caused by malnutrition.

Omar Yusuf, IAEA Office of Public Information and Communication