

Each dollar spent on kids' nutrition can yield more than \$100 later

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There are strong economic incentives for governments to invest in early childhood nutrition, reports a new paper from the University of Waterloo and Cornell University. Published for the Copenhagen Consensus Centre, the paper reveals that every dollar spent on nutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child's life can provide a country up to \$166 in future earnings.

"The returns on investments in nutrition have high benefit-cost ratios, especially in countries with higher income levels and a growing economy," said Professor Susan Horton, of the School of Public Health and Health Systems and the Department of Economics at Waterloo.

Children who are undernourished during the first 1,000 days of their lives typically show stunted growth patterns by the age of three and have poorer cognitive skills than their well-fed peers. As adults they are less educated, earn lower wages and have more health problems throughout their lives.

"Height-for-age is a much better measure of health than weight-for-age. It is also predictive of economic outcomes," said Professor Horton, also chair in global [health](#) economics at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. She analyzed height and income data from a longitudinal nutrition study from Guatemala for the report. "Good childhood nutrition produces people who can contribute more and help boost economic growth."

Studies of a range of low- and middle-income countries suggest that 1 cm more of adult height for men is associated with an increase in their earnings of 2.4 per cent.

"Over an adult's working life, we can expect that one dollar spent on [early childhood](#) nutrition will on average have \$45 worth of benefits in low and middle-income countries," said Horton.

The paper looked at the effects of stunting on low- and middle-income countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Yemen and India. The cost-benefit ratio was the greatest in Indonesia, where every dollar spent on early childhood nutrition could provide the country \$166 in future earnings.

"It really is a compelling economic argument for nutrition interventions," said Horton. "If we can reduce stunting through better early nutrition, we can improve quality of life not only for individuals, but nations as a whole."

Currently, the World Health Organization is aiming to reduce stunting among children under age five by 40 per cent as part of its 2025 nutrition goals, and it is widely expected that the rate of stunting will also be included in its Sustainable Development Goals, which will be announced in 2015.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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