

The Quorum

November 2023: Nutritional Health

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Child nutritional health involves ensuring that children are receiving the correct balance of nutritional intake to meet the necessary biological requirements. This is often influenced by social determinants, including the access families have to healthy and nourishing food, their neighborhood and housing situation (which encompasses their access to affordable grocery stores and minimal fast-food options), and also the nutritional emphasis of the school a child attends, whether through packed healthy lunches, or through the school's nutritional programs.

According to the CDC, maintaining nutritional health is vital to a child's overall health, as the gut microbiome is especially vulnerable and extremely sensitive to crucial developmental changes. A nutritious diet significantly contributes to a child's immune system development, as well as their overall physical and mental health. Malnutrition, characterized by unhealthy and insufficient nutrition intake for a child's dietary needs, can lead to severe cognitive and physical deficits, with potential long-term psychosocial impacts such as depression and anxiety. As of 2022, the USDA reported that over 6.4 million households with children are affected by food insecurity, which is essentially the lack of proper access to nutritious food. Although many children are protected and served nutritionally through non-profit organizations such as No Child Should Go Hungry and Food4Kids, over 381,000 households had children that unfortunately had a reduction in food intake and disruptions in consistently accessing healthy food.

The government has addressed child nutritional health through a plethora of legislative actions since 1946, such as laws that involve providing free and accessible food through the Summer Food Service Program (1968) and giving children access to fresh vegetables and fruit through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (2002). Through an initiative known as the Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) process, child nutritional health is assessed. With this process, Congress can essentially provide

assistance for child nutritional health by restructuring food bank sites to give free meals to children, provide Electronic Benefits Transfer or additional funds to children when schools are closed during the summer, and consistently assess the quality of meal programs and broaden the criteria for families to join affordable meal plans for their children. In 2023, Congress underwent the most recent CNR, building upon the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (2010) to further increase access to healthy food for low-income children. It is crucial to continue providing children with the healthiest possible food, emphasizing the importance of nourishment. Volunteering at food banks and regularly assessing the food provided can ensure sustainable action in promoting child nutritional health.

References:

1. [https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10266#:~:text=Child%20nutrition%20reauthorization%20\(CNR\)%20refers.WIC](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10266#:~:text=Child%20nutrition%20reauthorization%20(CNR)%20refers.WIC)
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