

## **UN Experts Call for Action to Tackle Malnutrition**

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U.N. experts are calling for greater action to control the dual epidemics of under-nutrition and over-nutrition. They say the number of malnourished people is growing globally and millions of people in poor and rich countries alike are dying from diseases related to poor nutrition. U.N., governmental and non-governmental experts are meeting in Geneva to work out new nutritional guidelines.

The U.N. experts say malnutrition does not just refer to emaciated children dying of hunger. They say malnutrition, which means bad nutrition, also includes the hundreds of millions of people suffering from obesity.

The United Nations estimates 170 million children globally are affected by under-nutrition. Over three million die each year from being underweight. At the same time, at least 300 million people are clinically obese.

The head of the U.N. Standing Committee on Nutrition, Catherine Bertini, says among these, about one-half million people in North America and Western Europe die every year from obesity-related diseases.

"As a result of that weight, they have a lot more health problems," she said. "They have more heart disease, more strokes, more cancer, more diabetes and more problems that put a strain on their bodies and ultimately on their families and their health care systems."

The experts agree problems of malnutrition, which include under-nutrition and over-nutrition, exist in poor and rich countries alike. They say these problems are increasing because of growing urbanization. As a consequence, people lead more sedentary lives and many poorer people eat cheap, nutrient deficient processed foods.

The secretary of the U.N. Committee, Roger Schrimpton, says this double epidemic of malnutrition is not well understood. He says most people and governments think of under-nutrition and obesity as separate issues. He says this poses problems when aid agencies try to get countries to donate funds for development assistance.

"So, for instance, the European Community will not fund obesity prevention work in a poor country," he said. "Even though the obesity rates are going like this in those countries because they think this is a problem not to do with poverty. But, it is to do with poverty."

Catherine Bertini says the single most important thing that must be done is to reach children under age two and ensure they have proper nutrition. She says the way a child is nourished from the time his or her mother becomes pregnant until age two will determine what happens to that child later in life.

"It is absolutely a critical time in peoples' lives and if we miss it, we miss them potentially forever," she said. "They are stunted. They have less capacity and they even have a likelihood of becoming overweight and obese later in life-stunted and obese. "

The U.N. experts urge countries to make proper nutrition a national priority. To give children a proper start in life, they recommend that women breast feed their infants. They are calling for better school feeding programs. They say women who control the feeding habits of their families must be properly educated in the foods that are good to eat.