



PRESS RELEASE

**Embargoed until
February 14, 2008 at 7:01 pm
Eastern Standard Time;
Friday, February 15,
00:01 GMT**

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Background materials are available at:
<http://www.ifpri.org/media/20080214Haiti.asp>

Preventing versus Treating

Study Shows Acting Early Is Key to Combating Child Malnutrition

Washington, DC—Preventing infants and young children from becoming undernourished is much more effective than treating children who are already moderately malnourished, according to a study published in the February 16 issue of *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal. The study in Haiti found that child stunting, underweight, and wasting (indicators of malnutrition) were 4, 6, and 4 percentage points lower, respectively, among poor communities participating in preventative programs than recuperative ones.

“While these numbers may not seem dramatic, the differences between the groups are substantial, especially considering the challenges of improving childhood nutrition in poor communities,” said Marie Ruel, lead author of *The Lancet* article and director of the Food Consumption and Nutrition Division at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

The study in Haiti was conducted by IFPRI and Cornell University in conjunction with World Vision-Haiti and the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance project of the Academy for Educational Development.

“Malnutrition must be addressed in the first two years of life, the crucial period for a child’s physical and cognitive development,” added Ruel. “If nutrition programs wait until children have already become malnourished, their benefits are significantly diminished.”

Despite compelling evidence of the need to target all children in poor communities before the age of two, not just those already malnourished, most food-assisted maternal and child health and nutrition programs target only underweight children, up to five years of age.

The study in Haiti compared the impact of two World Vision programs—both providing food assistance and health and nutrition interventions—on childhood nutrition. The first approach provided nine months of assistance to children six months to five years of age once they became underweight. The second targeted all children 6-24 months of age until they reached two years. Both programs also targeted pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers.

“This study completely changed our approach to fighting childhood malnutrition,” said Lesly Michaud, maternal and child health coordinator for World Vision-Haiti. “Based on the research findings, World Vision and other NGOs now target their food assistance and maternal and child health and nutrition programs to all children under two years of age in poor communities in Haiti, as well as in some other country programs.”

The Haiti study is part of an ongoing focus by *The Lancet* on maternal and child undernutrition and underscores the importance of acting early to reduce malnutrition.

“The findings from Haiti are of global significance because all children, no matter where they live, have the same nutritional needs in their first two years of life for proper growth and development,” explained Purnima Menon, co-author on *The Lancet* article and IFPRI research fellow, based in New Delhi, India. “The study is particularly relevant for South Asia, which has both the highest rates of child malnutrition in the world and is home to the greatest number of undernourished children.”

Another [IFPRI-led study](#) recently published in *The Lancet* found that improving the nutrition of very young children leads to increased productivity in adulthood. While that study highlights the long-term returns from investing in early childhood nutrition, the study in Haiti shows how to best go about it.

“Common sense tells us that preventing malnutrition is better than treating it, especially because children can suffer irreparable harm if undernourished during the first two years of life,” said Ruel. “The Haiti study provides concrete evidence that preventive programs can be highly successful on the ground, in real-life situations, with benefits that can last a lifetime.”

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The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) seeks sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty. IFPRI is one of 15 centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, an alliance of 64 governments, private foundations, and international and regional organizations. www.ifpri.org