

Glossary of Nutrition Terms

This resource is an accompanying material to the *Nutrition at Work* handbook. Visit NutritionConnect.org/Nutrition-at-Work to download the handbook.

Anaemia: Anaemia is a condition in which the size and/or number of red blood cells or their oxygen-carrying capacity is lower than it should be for healthy functioning. Anaemia has several causes, including iron deficiency, folate deficiency, infection and inflammation among others. It is frequently cited that 50% of anaemia is due to iron deficiency, but recent studies have shown that this proportion varies across settings. Consequently, policies and programmes to address anaemia should be tailored to the specific causes. The amount (concentration) of haemoglobin, an iron-containing oxygen-transporting protein contained in red blood cells, below a cut-off point is used to diagnose anaemia.

Diet-Related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs): Non-communicable diseases are diseases that are not contagious, i.e. not transmitted from one person to another or by insects or other pests. Diet-related NCDs are those diseases for which poor diet quality is an important cause, including diabetes, heart disease, some cancers, among others.

Food Safety: Through production, handling, storage, preparation and serving, food may become exposed to many biological, chemical, and/or physical contaminants. Food control agencies have set limits for such contaminants – some at zero (i.e. may not contain any of a substance), and some at very low levels that do not present risks for human health. Food safety refers to the totality of processes needed to ensure that levels of contaminants in food remain below those limits at all steps along the food supply chain, and thus avoid exposure and prevent food-borne illness resulting in safe food.

Fortification: Fortification is the practice of intentionally increasing the content of a micronutrient in a food to improve the nutritional quality of the food and prevent the health effects associated with micronutrient deficiency. Large-scale (also known as industrial or mass) fortification adds nutrients to foods that are commonly consumed by a large proportion of the population at the stage of food processing.

Macronutrient: Macronutrients include carbohydrates, fats, and proteins, which are components that are found in large amounts in food and are essential for life. Carbohydrates are needed primarily as a source of energy, while fats and proteins provide both energy and substances essential for body functions such as growth, muscle development and function, and many others.

Malnutrition: Malnutrition is a general term that encompasses a host of adverse health effects due to poor nutrition. Malnutrition may result in poor growth and development in children (stunting), wasting (thinness), overweight, obesity, micronutrient deficiencies, and diet-related non-communicable diseases.

Micronutrient: Micronutrient is a general term that refers to all vitamins (e.g. vitamin A, B, vitamins such as folate, vitamin D) and minerals (e.g. zinc, iron) that are required in small amounts for a host of different processes in the body – including the healthy functioning of all organ systems, growth, development, and health. An essential micronutrient is one that must be obtained from the diet because the body cannot produce it or does so in quantities insufficient to meet needs.

Micronutrient Deficiency: A micronutrient deficiency is caused by an inadequate intake of a vitamin or mineral in the diet and/or infection/inflammation and several ailments that hinder the absorption and utilisation of nutrients by the body. Deficiencies of some micronutrients result in specific syndromes when severe. Some of the most well-known examples include rickets (vitamin D deficiency), goitre (iodine deficiency) and scurvy (vitamin C deficiency). Less severe deficiency of many nutrients also has important health and development consequences, such as impaired brain and muscle development/functioning (e.g. iodine and iron deficiency). Micronutrient deficiency has often been termed “hidden hunger” because mild and moderate deficiency may have no visible consequences. The most well-known micronutrient deficiencies include iron, vitamin A, zinc, folate, iodine, vitamin D, but several others may also be of public health importance, such as vitamin B12 (particularly among strict vegetarians), thiamine (in populations which consume a lot of polished rice), among others.

Nutrient Density: Nutrient density or micronutrient density refers to the proportional amount of nutrients contained in food per some measure of weight or volume.

Nutrition: Nutrition refers to the “processes” through which a human being uses everything that is ingested for the purposes of maintaining life, growth and all normal functions. These processes include ingestion, digestion, absorption, as well as the transport, storage, metabolism, utilisation and elimination of food from the body. The result of these processes is reflected in the nutritional status of the individual.

Nutritious Food: A nutritious food is one that in the way it is consumed and by the individual that consumes it, provides beneficial nutrients (e.g. vitamins, minerals, proteins, essential fats, dietary fibres) and minimises potentially harmful elements (e.g. anti-nutrients, high quantities of saturated fats and sugars).

Overweight/Obesity: Overweight and obesity are measures of nutritional status that identify excess weight or body fat which increases risk of diet-related non-communicable disease. They are defined by measures of body size (anthropometry), usually height and weight, compared to values that in populations have been associated with higher health risks. Body mass index (BMI), or the relationship of weight to height (weight kg, divided by height in cm squared) is commonly used to diagnose overweight/ obesity. Commonly used cut off point for overweight in adults is BMI greater than 25, and for obesity, BMI greater than 30. However, in some populations, health risks related to excess weight may occur even at lower BMI. Because the expected proportion of weight to height for children and adolescents is different than that for adults, different indicators and cut-off points are needed to diagnose overweight/obesity.

Undernutrition: Undernutrition is a general term used to refer to any number of conditions that result from inadequate intake of energy and/or nutrients, and/or health issues that increase requirements, or hinder nutrient absorption and/or utilisation. These include micronutrient deficiency, stunting, thinness/wasting. While the term may be useful to draw attention to the issue, it is too general and should not be used to facilitate understanding of the causes of the problem or policy and programme actions needed to address them.

Definitions from the GAIN website: www.gainhealth.org/media/glossary