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The Impact of Nutrition in the First Three Years of Life on General Health in Adulthood

Amela Ivković O'Reilly*, & Hana Kustura

Faculty of Health Studies, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

***Corresponding author:** Amela Ivković O'Reilly, Faculty of Health Studies, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Abstract

Early childhood nutrition is pivotal for long-term health and cognitive development. This review highlights the benefits of proper maternal nutrition, breastfeeding, and nutrient-dense feeding in reducing chronic diseases and cognitive impairments. Poor early nutrition correlates with neurodevelopmental delays, while breastfeeding offers protective effects against infections and obesity. Public health initiatives focusing on early nutrition can mitigate health risks and socio-economic burdens, fostering healthier future generations.

Keywords: Early Childhood Nutrition, Cognitive Development, Breastfeeding, Maternal Health, Chronic Diseases

Introduction

Nutrition in the first three years of life is crucial for long-term health. Proper maternal nutrition during pregnancy supports optimal fetal development and prevents issues such as low birth weight. Breastfeeding within the first hour of birth and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months provide essential nutrients and protect against diseases. Introducing nutrient-dense complementary foods at six months supports growth and cognitive development. Conversely, poor early nutrition can lead to chronic diseases and cognitive impairments in adulthood. Addressing these challenges requires focusing on maternal health, breastfeeding support, and access to diverse, nutritious foods. Additionally, early nutritional interventions can have a profound impact on reducing mortality rates and improving overall quality of life. Policymakers must prioritize nutrition programs targeting pregnant women and young children to foster healthier future generations. Enhanced education and resources for parents can also play a vital role in improving early childhood nutrition.

Materials and Methods

Ten articles were analyzed to extract significant information from literature available in the PubMed database, published between 2014 and 2024. The scientific methods employed in this research include synthesis, induction, deduction, compilation, and concretization. The study is comprehensive and qualitative. This systematic review approach ensures a thorough evaluation of the current state of research on early childhood nutrition. The selected studies were critically assessed for their methodology and relevance to ensure robust and reliable conclusions. Data extraction focused on key indicators of health outcomes related to early nutrition, such as growth metrics, cognitive development scores, and incidence of chronic diseases.

Results

Overweight and obesity in early life primarily impact cognitive neurodevelopment, affecting attention, gross motor skills, and executive control. A higher intake of ultra-processed foods in children's diets is linked to increased weight gain, adiposity, early weaning, lower diet quality, metabolic alterations, diseases, and exposure to harmful packaging materials. Children exclusively breastfed for at least six months scored significantly higher in communication, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, and problem-solving compared to those breastfed for less than six months. Weaning after 12 months also resulted in higher scores across multiple domains. Nutritional deficiencies such as severe acute malnutrition, chronic undernutrition, iron deficiency, and iodine deficiency clearly impair brain development. Furthermore, early-life obesity is a significant predictor of adult obesity, highlighting the long-term impact of early nutritional choices. The data also indicate that breastfeeding provides a protective effect against various infections and allergies. The relationship

between dietary patterns and neurodevelopment underscores the importance of balanced nutrition from an early age.

Conclusions

Reducing childhood overweight and promoting healthy growth can mitigate future disease burdens. Both underweight and overweight/obesity significantly impact cognitive neurodevelopment. Breastfeeding positively affects overall child development and should be encouraged. Undernutrition negatively impacts cognitive and motor development, educational attainment, and productivity, leading to broader economic consequences. In the first three years, various biological and psychosocial hazards can influence a child's developmental trajectory, leading to adverse physical and psychological health outcomes that persist into adulthood. Emerging evidence suggests that early-life nutritional imbalances can cause epigenetic changes, contributing to chronic diseases throughout life. Public health initiatives must emphasize the importance of balanced nutrition during the critical early years to prevent long-term health issues. Continuous monitoring and support for at-risk populations can help identify and address nutritional deficiencies early. Investing in early childhood nutrition is not only beneficial for individual health but also has significant socio-economic advantages.

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