

# Reducing Stunting in Children Through Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancies

Stunting is a serious global health problem that impacts 159 million children under the age of 5. Stunting is the result of poor nutrition and other factors during pregnancy and a child's early years that lead to children having shorter stature, cognitive delays, and irreversible physical and mental impairments that hinder their potential in life.

## IMPACTS OF STUNTING

Stunted children are often a few inches shorter, and many experience cognitive damage and weakened immune systems, leaving them susceptible to diseases. The effects of stunting on children are generally permanent. While the threat continues for millions of children, solutions are at hand.

## How does Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancies (HTSP) impact stunting in children?

Properly timed and spaced pregnancies dramatically reduce the likelihood of stunting. Mothers cannot sufficiently breastfeed or care for the older sibling when a new baby is competing for nutrients, so the older child in the critical 1,000-day window (from conception to age 2) often loses out on being breastfed—a critical component of childhood nutrition that lowers the risk of stunting.

## What is HTSP?

HTSP is an approach to helping couples time their pregnancies to occur during a mother's healthiest years (ages 18-34) and space pregnancies by three to five years, improving both maternal and child health:

- Spacing pregnancies by at least three years could reduce under-5 mortality by 25%.
- In developing countries, the risks of premature birth and low birth weight double when conception occurs within six months of a previous birth.
- HTSP is a cost-effective way to reduce maternal deaths because it does not rely on complex technologies.

## Spacing pregnancies by at least 3 years



Space between pregnancies	LESS THAN SIX MONTHS	36-47 MONTHS	96 MONTHS
Children alive and well-nourished at age 5	43%	63%	75%

# THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS OF A CHILD'S LIFE

Why Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancies Is So Important



Pregnancy

While in the womb, the developing baby draws all of its nutrients from the mother, making good maternal nutrition essential.



Infants and Toddlers (*birth to 2 years*)

Breast milk provides essential nutrients and immunity against disease.

After the 1,000-day window\*, a mother can safely become pregnant again



Children (*2-5 years*)

Nutrients from milk and healthy foods help ensure brain development and reduce stunting.

\*1,000-day window: from conception to age 2

## What does the data actually show?

An analysis of demographic and health surveys taken between 2000 and 2005 in 52 countries found that for the 272,603 children whose height and weight were recorded, the rate of stunting declined as the length of the birth-to-pregnancy interval increased.

- Children conceived 12 to 17 months after the preceding birth were 23% more likely to be stunted and 19% more likely to be underweight than children conceived 36 to 47 months after the preceding birth.
- Only 43% of children conceived less than six months after the preceding birth were alive and well-nourished at the time of the survey.
- 63% of children conceived during the 36- to 47-month interval after the preceding birth were alive and well-nourished.
- With a birth-to-pregnancy interval of 96 months, 75% of children were alive and well-nourished.

## So what does this mean?

Many factors impact a child's health and development, but spacing pregnancies is a critical intervention that has a clear impact on a child's ability to grow, be educated, and succeed in life. By spacing pregnancies and timing them properly during the mother's healthiest years (18-34), parents can take an important step toward giving their children the best start in life.