

Fact sheet for National Nutrition Month - October 2022

“Nutrition at Low-Cost: Know, Find, Grow and Share”

Alternatives

1. Background

Proper nutrition is essential in maintaining optimum health, preventing diseases, and achieving full potential in growth and development. Investing in early nutrition is one of the best cost-effective strategies for the productivity of individuals and for the long-term sustainable development of the nation.

Food inflation in Sri Lanka has triggered a crisis magnifying hunger and malnutrition while threatening to erase hard-won gains in development. The inability to put sufficient and nutritious food on the table leads the vulnerable groups to change their diet; eating less nutritious food without reaching the daily nutrient requirement. Compromised nutrition with reduced calories, protein, and micronutrient intake could have lasting impacts, especially on the cognitive development of young children.

To overcome the nutritional vulnerability due to the current ongoing economic crisis, a robust multi-sectoral approach is needed with the collaboration of all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, during National Nutrition Month in 2022, the following recommendations for multi-sector actions have been developed to safeguard all Sri Lankan people from malnutrition and its complications.

2. Key action areas

Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health in collaboration with relevant multi-sectoral stakeholders has come up with recommendations in four key action areas, ‘to combat the nutrition vulnerability during the economic downturn of the country.

The four key action areas are;

- 1. Know**
- 2. Find Alternatives**
- 3. Grow**
- 4. Share**

2.1 'Know'

The community has to 'Know';

- **Individual nutritional status**
- **Locally available low-cost nutritious food**
- **Economical ways of preparation of meals**
- **Cash management for nutrition security**

Individual nutritional status

Improving nutrition literacy in the population is an important aspect during the present nutrition crisis. Therefore, each and every individual is encouraged to know their individual nutritional status.

- General population should regularly monitor BMI to maintain optimum nutrition. Each community member should be aware of healthy lifestyle including proper dietary practices. This will contribute to the national productivity and reduce health care burden due to Non-Communicable Diseases.
- Children under five years are identified as one of the most nutritionally vulnerable group and inadequate consumption of nutritious food may lead to wasting, stunting, and micronutrient deficiencies. Parents are encouraged to seek field health services to ensure regular growth monitoring and promotion.
- Parents and teachers need to pay more attention to nutrition among school children due to their rapid growth and overall development. Children should be empowered to maintain their own nutritional status and adopt healthy dietary behaviors.
- Nutritional deficiencies during pregnancy can lead to a number of complications and adverse outcomes in the mother, fetus, and newborn. This includes low birth weight, intrauterine growth restrictions, intra-uterine death, premature delivery, and further growth retardation. Maintaining weight gain according to pre-pregnancy BMI and proper nutrition to prevent micronutrient deficiencies can break the vicious cycle of undernutrition.
- Elders are vulnerable to malnutrition due to age-related physiological and psychological changes as well as social and economic difficulties. Healthy eating and monitoring their nutrition status are important to improve their quality of life.

Locally available low-cost nutritious food

People are encouraged to use locally available, low-cost foods for their daily meals to meet the recommended minimum dietary requirement per day. Most of these low-cost food items can

provide the same nutrient content that is present in high-cost food items that we usually consume.

Recommended food groups and serving sizes per day for a healthy adult include in the Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) for Sri Lankans (<https://nutrition.health.gov.lk/english/resource/1317/>).

Economical ways of preparation of meals

People are encouraged to explore new recipes and cooking methods with different combinations of food to improve nutrition security. (e.g., cooking a few vegetables together in one pot (“one pot cooking”), adding 3-4 sprat to vegetable curries, cooking a mixed rice dish adding leftover curries and fish/ meat). This will help to add even a small amount of protein to every meal and other benefits such as improved bioavailability of nutrients, fuel saving, increased taste and palatability of meals, and convenience.

(<https://nutrition.health.gov.lk/english/resource/publications/>).

Cash management for nutrition security

The food crisis has significantly negatively impacted the vulnerable populations such as estate and urban poor who were already affected by economic constraints, reducing their purchasing power and therefore vulnerable to poor nutritional status. Therefore, enhancing cash management skills is an important identified intervention in this current situation.

The Estate and Urban Health Unit of the Ministry of Health has developed a training package to provide necessary knowledge & competencies to the identified and potentially vulnerable communities on managing the available finances in collaboration with central bank, ADIC and SUN PF. Further information on the training package can be obtained from Estate and Urban Health Unit of Ministry of Health (estatehealth@gmail.com).

Public needs to be made aware:

- ✓ On daily/monthly income and expenditure.
- ✓ On prioritization of their needs.
- ✓ How to fulfill nutritional needs with a low budget without compromising nutritional values.
- ✓ How to save amidst economic crisis.

2.2 ‘Find Alternatives’

The community has to ‘Find Alternatives’.

- **Low cost alternatives for nutritious food**
- **Not frequently utilized food in the relevant geographic areas**
- **For mitigating household/ community food waste**

Low cost alternatives for nutritious food

Considering the current economic crisis, the use of low cost, locally available nutritious food alternatives is encouraged. “List of alternative foods” that is low cost and readily available during this economic downturn of the country is being prepared by the Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health, and the link will be shared in due course. This will help in maintaining a nutritious balanced meal cooked using locally available foods.

Not frequently utilized food in the relevant geographic areas

Sri Lanka is blessed with a wide variety of foods including cereals, yams, vegetables, and fruits that are widely unaware of and hence not frequently utilized. Some of them are abundant in certain geographical areas and in certain months of the year. People are advised to consume these food items depending on the availability to obtain nutrients at a low cost.

For mitigating household/ community food waste

Improper handling and storing, and unplanned cooking of food lead to a waste of food at the household and community levels. This will lead to a loss of nutrient quality, risk of unsafe food, and increased food waste which needs to be essentially prevented. The general public and relevant health authorities are encouraged to identify potential sources of food waste and to raise community awareness leading to sustainable measures to mitigate food waste. Numerous food preservation methods (e.g. ‘Maluambulthiyal’, ‘achcharu’ etc) can also be promoted in order to minimize food loss.

2.3 ‘Grow’

‘Grow’ include;

- **Home gardening to ensure micronutrient security**
- **Adopt under-utilized space and utensils for home gardening maximally**
- **Establish small backyard poultry at the household level**
- **Promote aquaculture (freshwater fish) and livestock management wherever suitable**

Home gardening to ensure micronutrient security

Home gardening is encouraged as a timely step in combating the current economic crisis. This is to address the poor, purchasing power to buy a variety of food items rich in micronutrients such as Iron, Zinc, Selenium, Vitamin A, C, E, etc. Vegetables and fruits are considered the most sustainable and cost-effective dietary sources of micronutrients. Home gardening will ensure a

variety of foods with different micronutrients to our daily meals and additionally will be a source of income generation.

(http://www.health.gov.lk/moh_final/english/article_read_more.php?id=957).

Recommendations for home gardening;

- Choose plants most suitable for your area, preference, and need of your family.
- Select plants that can provide essential micronutrients
- Plant another cycle midway so that there is continuity of harvest throughout.
- Seek more advice from Agriculture Instructor /Technical Assistant at Agrarian Service Center.
- Further technical knowledge from the Ministry of Agriculture on home gardening can be obtained via the following link.

(https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UzzP_V5M51lpVqgj6H9s5YPuqFbJJwjS/view)

Adopt under-utilized space and utensils for home gardening maximally

Discarded plastic and metal containers can be used in innovative ways to grow plants where limited space is available for home gardening. 'Roof tops' and balconies can also be used as an alternative space for home gardening in urban multi-storied dwellings.

Establish small backyard poultry at the household level

People are encouraged to raise chickens where space is adequate. This will contribute to fulfill the daily protein requirement. Additionally, it will provide manure to grow vegetables, fruits, and green leaves.

Promote aquaculture (freshwater fish) and livestock management wherever suitable

Communities are encouraged to promote the growth of freshwater fish in inland fisheries such as ponds, tanks, and reservoirs. Consumption of freshwater fish is promoted via raising community awareness and addressing palatability issues, myths, and beliefs related to the nutrient composition of freshwater fish.

2.4 'Share'

'Share' means,

- **Share the food you have in excess for a variety**
- **Share cooked food with the vulnerable through the community kitchen**
- **Promote 'Foster Scheme' to support the needy including school meal programme**
- **Establish local markets to share locally grown produce**

Share the food you have in excess for a variety

Sharing food that you have in excess with neighbors and friends is a cost-effective strategy for reducing the wastage of food. It will also help in adding variety to the daily meal.

Share cooked food with the vulnerable through the community kitchen

A 'Community Kitchen' concept can be used by any community to support the nutritionally vulnerable population. It should ensure food safety while preserving nutrition security. This concept needs to be expanded to all settings and local mechanisms to ensure sustainability should be explored.

Promote 'Foster Scheme' to support the needy including school meal programme

'Foster Schemes' should be promoted to ensure food and nutrition security for economically vulnerable populations. This could be provided in the form of a contribution to the healthy dry food ration basket or cash transfer to underprivileged nutritionally vulnerable households, preschool or school children for school meal programme, community settings, or individuals. The mechanism is being planned with the collaboration of the Child Protection Authority of the Department of Probation and Child Care Services.

Establish local markets to share locally grown produce

Local markets can be utilized to exchange and sell locally available, fresh foods at a low cost. This will also provide a platform for the local farmers to sell their goods. This is a good initiative in ensuring the food security of the local community during this economic crisis.

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