

BACKGROUND 2

Why are new WHO Child Growth Standards needed?

In 1997, WHO undertook a comprehensive review of child growth references. The review concluded that it was time to develop new standards that show how children *should* grow in all countries rather than merely describing how they grew at a particular time and place.

The existing references provided a basis for making comparisons only: they didn't enable evaluation and judgment. Standards, on the other hand, set benchmarks and therefore are more effective guides to, and evaluators of, interventions to improve healthy development and growth. An international standard to show how children *should* grow allows for comparisons across countries that can guide policymaking and support child health advocacy efforts.

By carefully selecting the children for the study for their optimum growth, the new WHO Child Growth Standards provide a basic, simple tool to assess how well we provide the best start possible for the world's children – as individuals and as populations. The greatest benefits are found when these measurements are linked with action, and used to evaluate progress.

Ideally, the new standard will provide the tools for improvements in knowledge and practical skills among health professionals. For example, health professionals will be better able to recognize both sub-optimal or excessive weight gain in children and assist effectively in the prevention of under-nutrition, overweight and obesity, and the health problems which arise from both (see backgrounder 4: '*Under- and over-nutrition*').

What difference will the new WHO Child Growth Standards make for children?

We now have scientific evidence proving that infants and children from geographically diverse regions of the world experience very similar growth patterns when their health and nutrition needs are met. This provides us with a crucially important and scientifically robust tool to assess compliance with a child's "right to grow."

The standards now serve as a measuring stick by which to evaluate the growth of a child or a population of children. They will serve as a key foundation for advocacy, implementation and measurement of health goals and indicators such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The standards will play direct roles at the national, regional and international levels in monitoring progress towards meeting four of the seven MDGs, and less directly the other three. The vulnerability of the health of infants and young children make assessments of child growth a 'sentinel' indicator of the health and socioeconomic development of the communities in which they live. Until now, an adequate measurement tool did not exist.

Similarly, the new Body Mass Index - BMI - measurement standard for children to age 5 will enable early detection and prevention of overweight and obesity in young children.

The standards will also serve to further the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes the duties and obligations to children that cannot be met without attention to normal human development. The WHO Growth Standards, derived from a world-wide sample of children and based on the reality that environmental differences, rather than genetics, are the principal determinant of disparities in physical growth, is an important step towards achieving the right of every child to grow and be healthy.

What are the optimum conditions for child growth?

The WHO Child Growth Standards are based on important 'norms' for childcare, nutrition, and health. For example:

- Sound nutritional practices are important throughout childhood: healthy breastfeeding should be supported, protected, and promoted and children should be provided safe, wholesome, and nutritionally appropriate foods during the period of complementary feeding (see backgrounder 3: '*WHO Child Growth Standards and Infant and Young Child feeding*').
- Full implementation of the objectives of the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding* (2002), as well as national guidelines for child nutrition, are crucial. Breastfed infants are lean babies, a characteristic that is documented by the new reference (see backgrounder 3: '*WHO Child Growth Standards and Infant and Young Child Feeding*').
- Vaccinations and good health care should be available and accessible to all infants and young children and families and their communities should do all they can to ensure a good pregnancy.
- Pregnant women and mothers should refrain from using tobacco.

The first step should be implementing the new standard in every country and ensuring that every child has his/her own chart against which his/her growth is assessed followed by an appropriate follow up.

Are the new standards just for children in developing countries?

The new WHO Child Growth Standards are global and for all children. They are intended to monitor the growth of every child worldwide, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and type of feeding.

Therefore, the standards are meant for use in both developing and developed countries. Many developed countries are concerned about obesity in young children but have local growth curves that identify the problem only *after* a child has become obese. For such countries, the new standard will be a useful tool for identifying overweight and obesity problems *before* they become too difficult to control or to prevent.

The new WHO Child Growth Standards provide a solid instrument for helping to meet the health and nutritional needs of *all* the world's children.

How will the new WHO Child Growth Standards be used by:

Health practitioners? The new standards and training materials provide health practitioners with an effective screening tool to assess growth of children in their care, ensure timely and adequate treatment if necessary, and counsel parents or caregivers.

Nutritionists? Through the easy-to-use application kit, the standards will serve as a robust tool to assess nutritional status of individuals or populations and monitor child growth and development.

Child and health advocates? As a tool that underscores the right of every child to grow to their full potential and by demonstrating that children from diverse geographical regions grow similarly, one can promote and protect the right of children to grow normally. The WHO Child Growth Standards also provide a means to advocate for protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding and adequate complementary feeding and thus for full implementation of the *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding* (2002).

Parents/caregivers? As a tool to better monitor the growth of their child to age five, to understand and follow nutritional recommendations and also to seek timely health care for their child.