Prevalence of wasting among under 6-month-old infants in developing countries and implications of new case definitions using WHO growth standards: a secondary data analysis

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ABSTRACT

Objectives To determine wasting prevalence among infants aged under 6 months and describe the effects of new case definitions based on WHO growth standards.

Design Secondary data analysis of demographic and health survey datasets.

Setting 21 developing countries.

Population 15 534 infants under 6 months and 147 694 children aged 6 to under 60 months (median 5072 individuals/country, range 1710–45 398). Wasting was defined as weight-for-height z-score <-2, moderate wasting as <-3 to <-2 z-scores, severe wasting as z-score <-3.

Results Using National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) growth references, the nationwide prevalence of wasting in infant under-6-month ranges from 1.1% to 15% (median 3.7%, IQR 1.8–6.5%; ~3 million wasted infants <6 months worldwide). Prevalence is more than doubled using WHO standards: 2.0–34% (median 15%, IQR 6.2–17%; ~8.5 million wasted infants <6 months worldwide). Wasting prevalence differences using WHO standards are more marked for infants under 6 months than children, with the greatest increase being for severe wasting (indicated by a regression line slope of 3.5 for infants <6 months vs 1.7 for children). Moderate infant-6-month wasting is also greater using WHO, whereas moderate child wasting is 0.9 times the NCHS prevalence.

Conclusions Whether defined by NCHS references or WHO standards, wasting among infants under 6 months is prevalent in many of the developing countries examined in this study. Use of WHO standards to define wasting results in a greater disease burden, particularly for severe wasting. Policy makers, programme managers and clinicians in child health and nutrition programmes should consider resource and risk/benefit implications of changing case definitions.

What this study adds

In developing countries, large numbers of infants under 6 months are wasted; we estimate that 0.8 million are severely wasted worldwide and 2.2 million moderately wasted (diagnosed using NCHS growth references)

Using WHO standards to diagnose wasting results in a large prevalence increase: an extra 3 million infants under 6 months severely wasted and an extra 2.5 million moderately wasted worldwide.

What is already known on this topic

Infants aged under 6 months are often excluded from nutrition surveys and marginalised in malnutrition treatment programmes.

In a May 2009 joint statement, the WHO and UNICEF recommended a transition to WHO growth standards to identify wasting but only reviewed the implications for children aged from 6 to under 60 months.

Infant-6-month wasting. WHO standards aim to be internationally applicable, describing how infants ‘should grow when free of disease and when their care follows healthy practices such as breastfeeding and non-smoking’. A 2009 WHO/UNICEF joint statement endorsed their use for ‘identification of severe acute malnutrition in infants and children’. They are now being rolled out internationally and are beginning to replace the previously dominant National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) growth references. However, despite being highlighted as an ‘urgent’ issue by the expert consultation preceding the WHO/UNICEF statement, implications for infants under 6 months were not discussed.

We aim therefore: (1) To examine the prevalence of infant under-6-month wasting in developing countries. (2) To examine how reported programmes to plan, monitor and evaluate treatment services for infants under 6 months.

New case definitions based on WHO growth standards are relevant to diagnosing infant-6-month wasting. WHO standards aim to be internationally applicable, describing how infants and children ‘should grow when free of disease and when their care follows healthy practices such as breastfeeding and non-smoking’. A 2009 WHO/UNICEF joint statement endorsed their use for ‘identification of severe acute malnutrition in infants and children’. They are now being rolled out internationally and are beginning to replace the previously dominant National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) growth references. However, despite being highlighted as an ‘urgent’ issue by the expert consultation preceding the WHO/UNICEF statement, implications for infants under 6 months were not discussed.

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Childhood wasting (acute malnutrition) is a global public health problem with serious consequences for both individuals and societies. While community-based treatment strategies are making important progress tackling wasting in children aged from 6 to less than 60 months (henceforth ‘children’), wasted infants aged under 6 months are often sidelined. A major factor exacerbating the challenges for infants under 6 months is a paucity of disease prevalence data. This is important for policy makers, managers and clinicians delivering health and nutrition
prevalence will change when WHO standards, rather than NCHS references, are used to define cases.

To contextualise our findings, we compared infant under-6-month wasting with that in older children (from 6 to under 60 months) from the same populations.

METHODS

Study design, setting and population

We performed secondary analysis of 21 demographic and health survey (DHS) datasets. DHS are large national surveys, standardised across and within countries (http://www.measuredhs.com/).

We selected 21 countries from a reference population of 36 that account for the majority of the global malnutrition disease burden and that had available DHS anthropometry data collected in the past 10 years. We registered our project via http://www.measuredhs.com/accesssurveys/access_instructions.cfm.

Variables and data handling

Current definitions of wasting are summarised in table 1.

We calculated NCHS z-scores from weight, height/length, age and sex variables using Emergency Nutrition Assessment for software for standardised monitoring and assessment of relief and transitions (SMART). Extreme values are more likely to represent measurement or database errors than an individual who is truly very small or very large. Following commonly used nutrition survey criteria, we thus excluded individuals with: weight-for-height z-score (WHZ) (NCHS) ≤–4 or >+ 6; or weight-for-age z-score (WAZ) (NCHS) ≤–6 or >+ 6; or height-for-age z-score (HAZ) (NCHS) ≤–6 or >+ 6; or incompatible combinations of HAZ and WHZ: (HAZ >3.09 or WAZ >6; or height-for-age z-score (HAZ) (NCHS) <–4 or >+ 6; or weight-for-age z-score (WAZ) (NCHS) <–6 or >+ 6; or weight-for-height z-score (WHZ) (NCHS) <–2 cut-off curves for boys. Girl’s curves are similar and are not shown. The gap between WHZ (WHO) and WHZ (NCHS) is related to the prevalence of child wasting: r²=0.66 (using NCHS), r²=0.84 (using WHO). Prevalence is lowest using NCHS-based case definitions: 1.1–15%, (median 3.7%, IQR 1.8–6.5%). Seven of the 21 countries have acceptably low (<3%) wasting. WHO-based prevalence is higher: 2.0–34% (median 15%, IQR 6.2–17%). Only one country remains in the acceptable category. Among children (figure 1b) NCHS/WHO differences are minimal.

Figure 2 separates severe and moderate wasting. Highlighted slopes indicate the magnitude of change in wasting prevalence when case definitions change from NCHS to WHO: severe wasting in infants under 6 months is 3.5 times greater and severe child wasting 1.7 times greater. Moderate wasting in infants under 6 months is also greater with WHO standards. In contrast, moderate child wasting decreases.

Table 2 shows regression equations for figure 2. Regression slopes indicate the magnitude of change in wasting prevalence when case definitions change from NCHS to WHO: severe wasting in infants under 6 months is 3.5 times greater and severe child wasting 1.7 times greater. Moderate wasting in infants under 6 months is also greater with WHO standards. In contrast, moderate child wasting decreases.

Table 3 presents wasting in terms of the numbers affected. Rounded figures emphasise that these are estimates and assume that our sample is representative of all developing countries.

Finally, figure 3 shows WHO and NCHS WHZ −3 and WHZ −2 cut-off curves for boys. Girl’s curves are similar and are not shown. The gap between WHZ (WHO) and WHZ (NCHS)
growth curves is greatest for infants under 6 months; this explains why NCHS/WHO changes are greatest in this age group. Differences are also greater for WHZ −3 than for −2 curves; this explains why severe wasting changes more than moderate wasting.

DISCUSSION
Principal findings
Our data suggest that large numbers of infants under 6 months in developing countries are wasted. Prevalence is greatest when using WHO growth standards to define cases; severe infant wasting prevalence is 3.5 times greater than when using NCHS references (based on the regression line slope). By comparison, severe child wasting is 1.7 times greater using WHO standards. Moderate infant under-6-month wasting is 1.4 times greater, whereas moderate child wasting decreases.

Strengths
Whereas previous studies have reported an increase in infant under-6-month wasting when using WHO growth standards,19,20 our findings clearly illustrate the magnitude of change. Focusing on weight-for-height directly informs health and nutrition programmes treating infant wasting: survey prevalence reflects need and thus guides treatment service initiation and scale-up.

Limitations
DHS surveys do not record nutritional oedema. As this independently defines acute malnutrition,21 our results underestimate the true caseload that treatment programmes should plan for.

We recognise possible biases: DHS surveys are not all done at the same time of year; weight, age or height might be incorrectly measured or reported. These biases would affect inter-country comparisons and overall prevalence estimates. As the
same raw anthropometric measurements (whether accurate or not) are used to calculate an individual’s WHZ (NCHS) and WHZ (WHO), the effect on NCHS/WHO changes is unlikely to be marked.

Strengths and weaknesses in relation to other studies
The results extrapolated from our 21-country dataset are comparable to figures cited elsewhere. This is consistent with our sample being representative of other developing countries. A 2006 review quoted 13.1 million and 47.1 million as severely and moderately wasted, respectively, using NCHS. These figures are based on a mix of surveys, some including others excluding infants under 6 months. Our NCHS-based estimates (infants under 6 months and children combined) are 9.3 million severely and 40.7 million moderately wasted. A 2008 review using WHO standards quoted 19.3 million severely wasted. Our figure is 19.8 million.

Implications for policy and practice
First, we recommend that nutrition surveys more routinely include infants under 6 months. Our data help estimate infant wasting prevalence, but specific settings are likely to have specific epidemiological patterns.

Second, we suggest that programmes should consider their capacity to treat infants who are identified as wasted. This is particularly important before adopting WHO-based case definitions. Many programmes already struggle to deal with the smaller number of NCHS-diagnosed wasted infants.

Finally, we call for a review of the effects of diagnosing greater numbers of infants under 6 months as wasted. Current treatment guidelines focus on the anthropometry for diagnosing infant wasting. An increased survey prevalence thus
equates to greater numbers eligible for treatment. This has possible risks: the evidence base underlying current treatments for infants under 6 months is weak; if clinically well, exclusively breastfed infants under 6 months are labelled as ‘small’ (ie, below −3 or −2 WHZ), mothers might become concerned and inappropriately introduce ‘top-up’ foods or breastmilk substitutes. This would have adverse consequences given the well-documented protective effects of exclusive breastfeeding. We note their technical superiority and that they are based on a highly selected population of healthy, optimally fed infants with relatively low statistical variance. However, this ‘gold standard’ of growth could be difficult to achieve for many infants in developing countries.

For clarity, we examined only z-score case definitions, which are preferred for nutrition reporting. For admissions, many feeding programmes also use weight-for-height percentage of median. Moving from weight-for-height percentage of median (NCHS) to WHZ (WHO) may result in different changes to those described. Finally, we suggest that alternative diagnostic criteria for infants under 6 months be considered alongside anthropometry: for example, different z-score cut-offs; mid-upper arm circumference; body mass index and clinical criteria.

CONCLUSIONS
Wasting among infants under 6 months is prevalent in many of the developing countries examined in this study. Using WHO standards to define wasting results in a greater prevalence of both severe and moderate infant under-6-month wasting. Policy makers and programme managers should consider the implications of this change. An international policy statement on infant under-6-month wasting would fill an important gap because neither the 2009 statement on WHO growth standards nor the 2007 statement on the management of wasting address this age group.

Unanswered questions
The generalisability of our results could be confirmed by examining other datasets. Work is also needed to explore risk factors for wasting in infants under 6 months and to determine which infants benefit most from which treatments.

We were unable to explore why age-related differences in NCHS and WHO growth curves are so marked. We recognise that WHO standards represent an important advance on NCHS and WHO growth curves are so marked. We note their technical superiority and that they are based on a highly selected population of healthy, optimally fed infants with relatively low statistical variance. However, this ‘gold standard’ of growth could be difficult to achieve for many infants in developing countries.

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REFERENCES