

Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS) Nutrition

Undernutrition in Lao PDR is decreasing, but the pace of improvement is slow

Malnutrition is associated with more than half of all child deaths worldwide. A reduction in the prevalence of malnutrition will also reduce child mortality. High rates of undernutrition in children age under 5 continue to be one of the biggest challenges in Lao PDR.

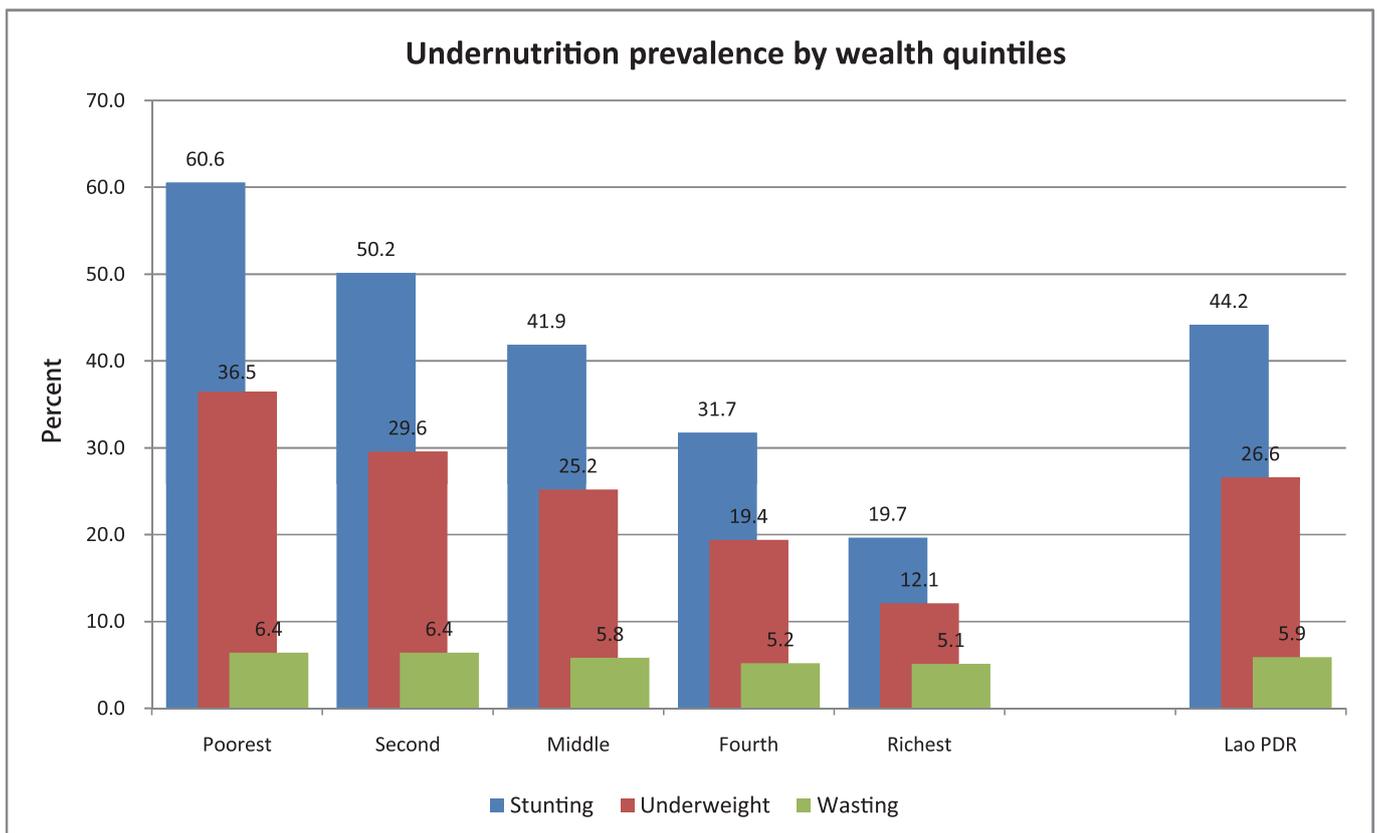
Chronic undernutrition continues to be high, with an estimated 44 per cent of children age under 5 stunted, 27 per cent underweight and 6 per cent wasted (based on WHO Growth Standards, 2006).

The percentage of underweight and stunted children increases dramatically and steadily in correlation with the decreasing education level of the mother. Among children whose mothers are uneducated, 35 per cent are underweight and 58 per cent are stunted, compared to 4 per cent and 15 per cent of children whose mothers have higher levels of education. Similarly, as many as 37 per cent of children from

the poorest quintile are underweight and 61 per cent are stunted compared to 20 per cent and 12 per cent of children from the richest quintile households respectively.



© UNICEF Lao PDR / 2012 / Noorani



Newborn babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of life

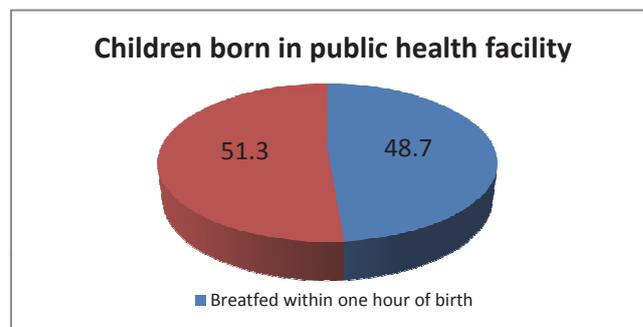
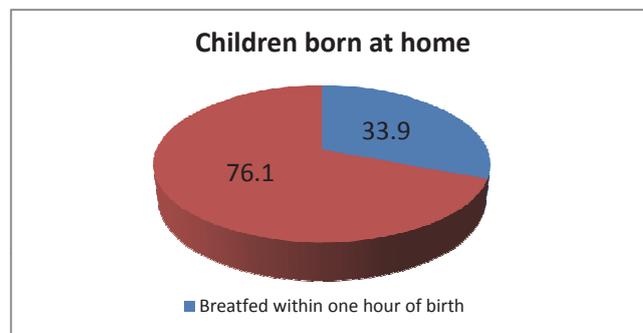
Early initiation of breastfeeding is a very important step in the management of lactation, and ensures that the infant receives colostrum ('first milk'), which is rich in protective agents, and also helps establish a physical and emotional relationship between the baby and the mother.



© UNICEF Lao PDR / 2012 / Noorani

Approximately half of the babies delivered in a health facility are breastfed within the first hour of birth, compared to only a third of babies delivered at home. Only 3-in-10 babies born to a mother with no education or to a mother in the lowest wealth quintile are breastfed within the first hour of birth. The highest prevalence of breastfeeding within the first hour of birth (55 per cent) is found among children born to Chinese-Tibetan headed households.

Practicing 'exclusive breastfeeding' means giving infants age less than 6 months only breast milk and no other fluids or food, and this applies to around 40 per cent of Lao children. The practice of bottle-feeding causes concern because preparation may be unhygienic and there may be contamination from the use of unsafe water. Bottle-feeding is more common in urban (34 per cent) than rural areas (13 per cent).



Adequate, safe and appropriate complementary infant feeding should begin at 6 months

Continued breastfeeding beyond 6 months of age should be accompanied by the consumption of nutritionally adequate, safe and appropriate complementary foods that help meet nutritional requirements when breast milk is no longer sufficient. Solid, semi-solid or soft food should be introduced at 6 to 8 months. Overall, 52 per cent of infants aged 6 to 8 months are receiving solid, semi-solid or soft foods.

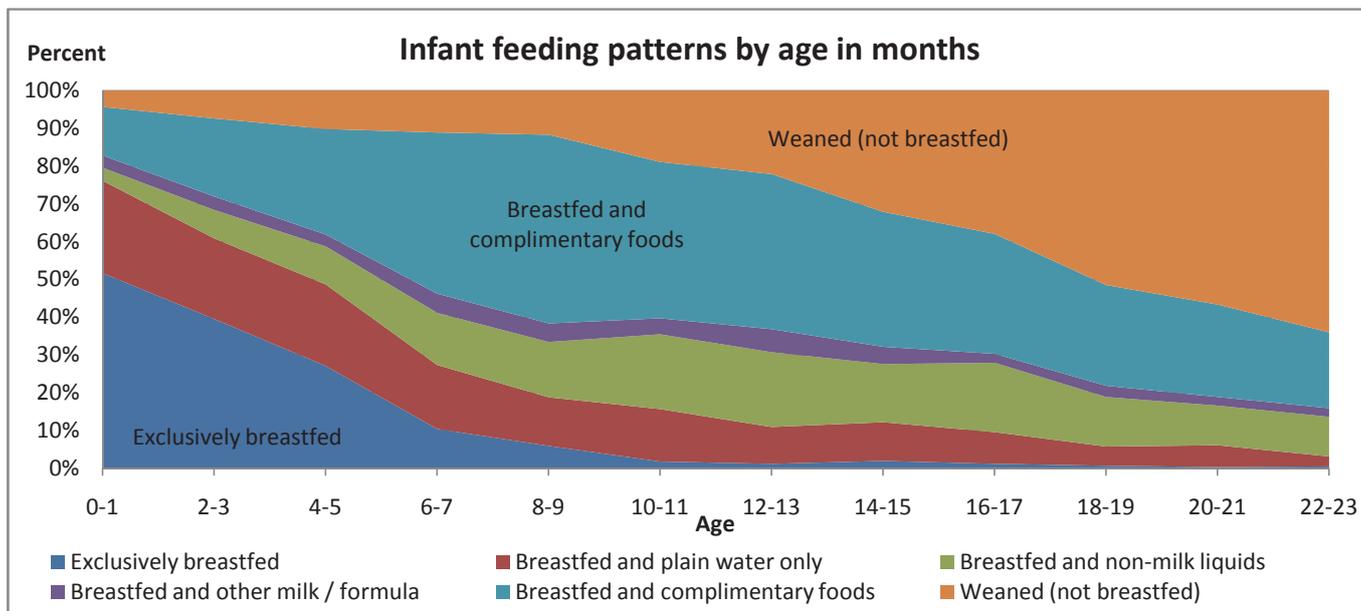
Some 50 per cent of breastfeeding infants, and 72 per cent of infants who are not breastfeeding, are receiving solid, semi-solid, or soft food. Findings indicate that recommended feeding practices are not being followed. Some infants aged 6 to 8 months are being introduced to complementary food too late and some are stopping breastfeeding too early. Nearly half of all 6 to 8 month-old infants are not fed age-appropriately. All communities could therefore benefit from Infant and Young Child Feeding interventions.

The minimum standard for the number of times a child should receive solid, semi-solid or soft foods depends on the child's age and whether or not the child is still breastfeeding. Only 43 per cent of children aged 6 to 23 months are fed at least the minimum number of times, and the same proportion of



© UNICEF Lao PDR / 2012 / Noorani

girls and boys receive the minimum number of meals. The proportion of children receiving the minimum number of meals is drastically low (less than 15 per cent) in Oudomxay, Huaphanh and Sekong provinces.



Micronutrients are needed to promote the physical and cognitive development of a child

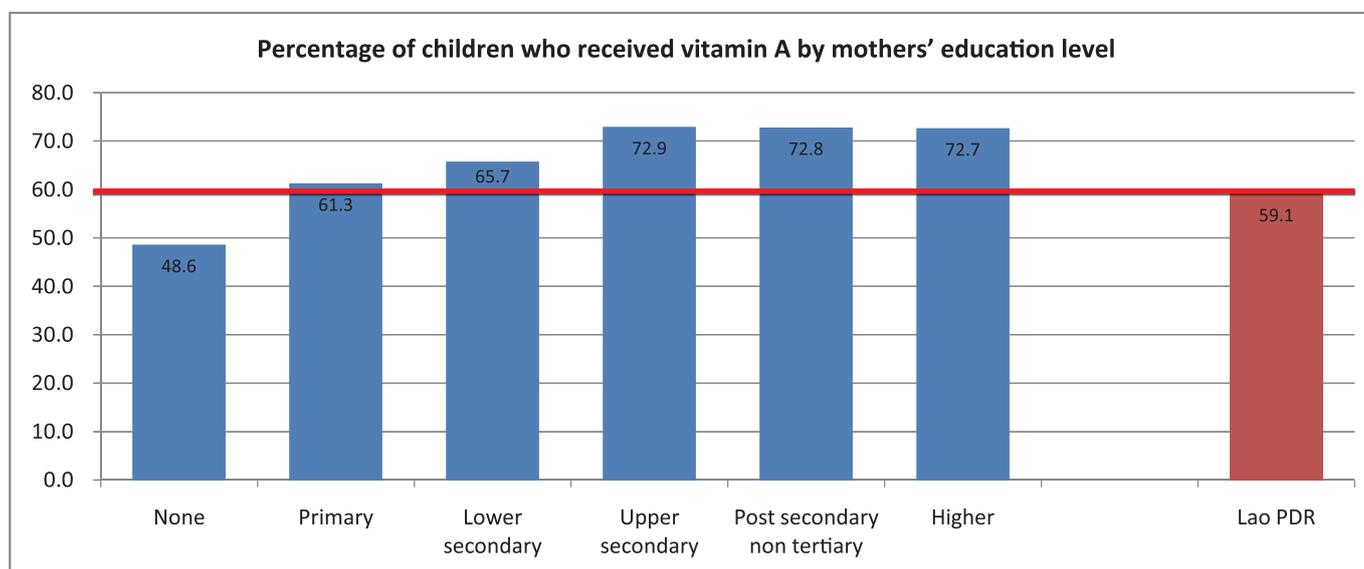
Iodine

Iodine Deficiency Disorders are the world's leading cause of preventable mental retardation and impaired psychomotor development in young children. In its most extreme form, iodine deficiency causes cretinism. It also increases the risks of stillbirth and miscarriage in pregnant women.

Iodized salt was found in 80 per cent of households. Since the goal of eliminating iodine deficiency is considered attainable when more than 90 per cent of households are using adequately iodized salt, further work is needed to promote its use. Some possible obstacles to achieving universal use of iodized salt include: the production of non-iodized salt by small factories in the country; the import of non-iodized salt; and inadequate preservation of iodized salt at production, distribution and household level.

Vitamin A

Vitamin A is essential for good eyesight and a properly functioning immune system. Although 59 per cent of children age 6 to 59 months were reported to have received high-dose vitamin A in the 6 months before the survey, there was marked variation across the country, with only 32 per cent of children receiving a vitamin A supplement in Savannakhet, compared to 88 per cent in Xayabury. The percentage of children receiving vitamin A supplementation increases steadily with mothers' level of education, increasing from 49 per cent of children of uneducated mothers to 61 per cent of children whose mothers have primary education, and 73 per cent of children whose mothers have upper secondary or higher education.



Low birth weight babies are at risk of death and diminished growth development

Low birth weight applies to a baby who weighs less than 2,500 grams at birth. Weight at birth is a good indicator not only of a mother's health and nutritional status, but also the newborn's chances for survival, growth, long-term health and psychosocial development. Children born underweight also tend to have a lower IQ and cognitive disabilities, affecting their performance in school and their job opportunities as adults.

Some 43 per cent of babies were weighed at birth, at which time, 15 per cent of infants are estimated

to weigh less than 2,500 grams. Low birth weight decreases steadily in correlation with increases in mothers' education level and wealth quintile; 17 per cent of babies born to mothers with no education are of low birth weight compared to 10 per cent of children born to mothers with higher education. Twenty per cent of babies in the South have low birth weight, compared with 13 per cent and 14 per cent in the Northern and Central regions, respectively. The higher percentage in the South may be the result of food insecurity brought on by flooding after Typhoon Ketsana.

