

Malnutrition Stunting Tibetan Children's Growth

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Poor nutrition--not genetics or high altitude--is stunting the growth of children in Tibet, researchers report.

Some studies have found that children raised in high-altitude areas such as Tibet tend to grow more slowly, while other studies have been inconclusive. To investigate, Dr. Nancy S. Harris from the Public Health Institute in Santa Cruz, California, and colleagues compared young children in Tibet with children in the United States.

“Our data show that Tibetan children are not 'small but healthy.' They have clinical signs of malnutrition as well as high morbidity and mortality,” Harris and colleagues write. Problems linked to childhood stunting include impaired development, lower intelligence, difficulties in school and lower capacity for work in adulthood.

The study of nearly 2,100 children in Tibet aged 0 to 84 months found that more than half had moderately or severely stunted growth that was associated with rickets, skin lesions and bloated abdomen. Severe stunting occurred mainly among children living in rural areas.

The finding that stunted growth may be due to nutritional factors can be used to develop health programs targeting children living in certain countries, the researchers suggest in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (news - web sites) for February 1.

Poor nutrition and diseases that are associated with malnutrition “can be modified by changes in health education and healthcare,” the authors conclude. They worry that theories linking high altitude and children's growth may draw attention away from the “urgent need for maternal and child health programs in Tibet.”

“As each day passes, the children of Tibet are suffering from a silent calamity that causes many to die and that inhibits the development of the survivors,” Drs. Glen E. Maberly and Kevin M. Sullivan from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, write in an accompanying editorial.

“One wonders how many more studies the children of Tibet will have to endure before those with the resources make the political and economic commitment to say that enough is enough; it is time to make things better.”

SOURCE: The New England Journal of Medicine 2001;344:341-347, 373-374