

Standing Committee on Nutrition

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SCN Endorses the New WHO Growth Standards for Infants and Young Children

The Standing Committee on Nutrition of the United Nations System (SCN) welcomes and endorses the long-awaited WHO Child Growth Standards, released on April 27, 2006.

For the first time, the new WHO Child Growth Standards provide an effective tool for detecting undernutrition, overweight and obesity in children in all countries of the world, thus addressing the double burden of malnutrition that is increasingly affecting populations on a global basis. The new growth standards demonstrate that children born in different regions of the world, and given an optimum start in life, have the potential to grow and develop within the same range of height and weight for age. These growth standards are based on a careful long-term study of infants and children from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. These children were fed according to accepted international nutritional standards, and their mothers were adequately nourished and avoided known adverse factors such as tobacco exposure.

Growth charts based on the new WHO Child Growth Standards will differ from any existing growth charts in a number of innovative ways. For the first time they will describe “how children *should* grow,” which is a prescriptive approach, not just a descriptive one. These standards show that all children across all regions can attain a similar standard of height and weight and development with adequate feeding practices, good healthcare and a healthy environment. It is, then, a more proactive way of measuring and evaluating child growth, setting out normative conditions and evaluating children and populations against that standard. As such, a key characteristic of the new standard is that it establishes breastfeeding as the biological “norm” and the breastfed infant as the standard for measuring healthy growth. Previous reference charts were based on the growth of a mixture of breastfed and artificially-fed children. Furthermore, the pooled sample from the six participating countries allows the development of a truly international standard, in contrast to the previous international reference based on children from a single country. The development for the first time of standardized Body Mass Index (BMI) charts for infants to five years of age is a major innovation in assessing healthy weight growth of children. Additionally, the development of *Windows of Achievement* for six key motor development milestones will provide a unique link between physical growth and motor development.

The SCN is fully committed to supporting and promoting the adoption of the new WHO Child Growth Standards globally. The growth standards establish guidelines for the healthy growth and development of all infants and young children in all countries. They also provide support for good general mother and child health care practices such as immunization, sound nutrition (starting with exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life), and adequate pre- and post-natal care for mothers (including good nutrition and avoidance of tobacco). The new Growth Standards provide further support for the promotion of internationally recognized infant and young child feeding recommendations: exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, thereafter the introduction of adequate complementary foods while breastfeeding is continued to two years and beyond. The growth standards will be widely used as a tool in public health, public nutrition, medicine and by governmental and health organizations for monitoring the well-being of children and for detecting children or populations not growing properly or who are under- or overweight, requiring specific health and nutrition responses. The SCN will promote the new growth standards in all of the activities carried out under its mandate, in order to achieve its vision of a world free from hunger and malnutrition.

Many SCN members collaborated in and supported the realization of the Multi Centre Growth Study led by WHO. The project was supported financially by the Governments of Brazil, the Netherlands, Norway, Oman, and USA, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Many other governments, non-governmental organizations and UN agencies, and in particular the United Nations University and UNICEF actively collaborated in its realization. Further information on the study and on the new WHO Growth Standards for Infants and Young Children can be obtained at the WHO website (<http://www.who.int/nutrition>).