

WHAT IS DEPRIVATION OF FOOD?

Food deprivation is total or partial restriction of food or contamination or manipulation of food provided to an individual (1,2). This can either be intentional or as a result of poor resources. Mandela Rule number 22 states that “Every prisoner shall be provided by the prison administration at the usual hours with food of nutritional value adequate for health and strength, of wholesome quality and well prepared and served” (3). Rule 43 further prohibits the “reduction of a prisoner’s diet or drinking water” as a disciplinary measure or restriction (3).

IN PRACTICE

Manipulation of food supply has been a tool for physiological influence during interrogation and detention for a long time (2). An example of food manipulation is replacing normal food with a commercial liquid meal thereby presenting detainees with a bland, unappetizing, but yet a nutritionally complete diet (2). In some prisons in the USA, a form of disciplinary punishment is to serve inmates their daily diet as an unappetizing “food loaf” where all ingredients are mixed together. There have been several lawsuits from inmates who state that the serving of “food loafs” is a cruel and unusual punishment (4).

Food deprivation either as a form of torture or as a result of poor prison conditions has been documented in China, USA, Turkmenistan, Sudan, Russia, Italy, Japan, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Sudan, Gabon, Palestine, Tanzania and likely occurs in many more countries across the world (5–14).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

The deprivation of food is experienced as a direct threat to a person’s life since food is a basic need. A diet that repeatedly lacks adequate nutrition intake leads to malnutrition which can weaken the immune system, delay wound healing, cause pain, and disorientation. Symptoms of malnutrition include dry and scaly skin, swollen gums, weight loss, thinned hair, and decaying teeth (15–17). Consistent food deprivation results in starvation which can lead to profound weakness, the inability to sustain even the smallest physical efforts, frailty, depression, apathy, increased urination, bradycardia (slowed heart rate), hypertension, constant chills, fatigue, reduction in circulation and cardiac function, and increased risk of infections e.g. pneumonia, tuberculosis and gastrointestinal infections (15,17,18). Ongoing food deprivation may lead to death in 8-12 weeks.

Studies examining the effects of food deprivation have found that food restrictions under circumstances of stress causes deficits in cognitive functions, impairs short-term memory and can lead to depression (2,19). Furthermore, poor diet coupled with lack of hygiene can lead to vitamin deficiency syndromes, a host of malnutrition diseases and death due to dysentery (1).

CONCLUSION

States are obliged to ensure sufficient and adequate food is available to all detainees in places of detention in accordance with the Mandela Rules. Food deprivation can consist of total or partial deprivation as well as manipulation. The specific health consequences related to food deprivation depend on the specific food deprivation

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