

## WHAT IS DEPRIVATION OF FOOD?

Food deprivation is defined as food intake below the required minimum energy level. It can be a total or partial restriction of food (1, 19). Food manipulation, also addressed in this factsheet, refers to the quality, aspect, taste, or contamination of the food provided to an individual.

Food deprivation can either be intentional or a result of poor resources. UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) number 22 states: "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: "reduction of a prisoner's diet or drinking water" as a disciplinary measure or restriction (3).

Food deprivation is one of the oldest methods of punishment (19).

## IN PRACTICE

Manipulation of food supply has been a tool for physiological influence during interrogation and detention for a long time (2). An example is, replacing normal food with a commercial liquid meal thereby presenting detainees with a bland, unappetizing meal, despite it being nutritionally complete (2).

In some prisons in the US, a form of disciplinary punishment is to serve inmates their daily diet as an unappetizing "food loaf" where all ingredients are mixed.

There have been lawsuits in the US regarding this practice which could allegedly constitute cruel and unusual punishment. However, so far there is no clear legal opinion on that (4).

Food deprivation either as a form of torture or as a result of poor prison conditions has been documented in China, the US, 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

Food is a basic need and deprivation from it is experienced as a direct threat to a person's life since a diet that repeatedly lacks adequate nutrition leads to malnutrition and eventually starvation (15). The symptoms vary depending on the nutrient deficit and conditions (victim's health, duration of malnutrition, etc.).

Food and vitamin deprivation can affect practically all body organs. This includes the cardiovascular (heart) that can result in arrhythmias (irregular heart rate), bradycardia (slowed heart rate) and hypotension (low blood pressure) (15,18,19); gastrointestinal (stomach and intestines), hereunder liver dysfunction, dysphagia (swallowing difficulties) etc. (19); the renal (kidneys) which in practice can cause fatigue, weakness, progressive oedema and affect memory and concentration (17,18,19); neurological (brain) effects can result in brain atrophy (weakening) and peripheral neuropathies (damage to the nerves located outside the brain and spinal cord). This can also affect memory, attention, concentration, and confusion (2,18,19).

Malnutrition also has an endocrine (hormones) and hematological (blood) impact (19). A diet that repeatedly lacks adequate nutrition intake can weaken the immune system, and increase the risk of infections, particularly pneumonia, tuberculosis, and gastrointestinal infections (15,17). It can also affect the skeletal structure (bones and muscles) potentially resulting in osteoporosis, which can cause pathological fractures and myopathies (muscle diseases). Dermatological (skin) effects of malnutrition include hair and nail loss, dry skin that can easily bleed and itch and delayed wound healing (16,17,19).

## CONCLUSION

The specific health consequences related to food deprivation depend on the specific food deprivation. Whether partial or full, food deprivation can have dire health consequences. States are obliged to ensure that sufficient and adequate food is available to all detainees in places of detention and that the food supply is not intentionally manipulated to make it less appetizing in accordance with the Mandela Rules.

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