

The Relationship Between Maternal Knowledge of Food Nutrition and the Incidence of Stunting at the Padang Rubek UPTD Health Center

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: March 25, 2026

Revised: April 15, 2026

Accepted: May 20, 2026

Keywords:

Mother's Knowledge;

Food Nutrition;

Incidence of Stunting.

Abstract

Background: Nutritional issues in early childhood, particularly during the first 1,000 Days of Life (HPK), crucially determine the quality of a child's growth and development. Low maternal nutritional knowledge regarding diverse food intake can severely disrupt toddler development, contributing directly to long-term health consequences such as stunting.

Aims: This study aims to analyze the relationship between mothers' knowledge of food nutrition and the incidence of stunting at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025, encompassing maternal characteristics, nutritional knowledge levels, and toddler growth status.

Methods: Utilizing an analytical observational design with a *cross-sectional* approach, this study involved 75 mothers of toddlers selected via accidental sampling. Data were gathered through structured questionnaires to assess maternal knowledge and anthropometric measurements (*z-score*) to determine stunting status, followed by univariate and bivariate analysis using the *Chi-Square* test in SPSS.

Result: The demographic profile showed that most respondents had a senior high school education (57%) and were housewives (80%). Univariate findings indicated maternal nutritional knowledge was 36% sufficient, 32% good, and 32% poor, while toddler growth status revealed 79% were not stunted and 21% were stunted. The *Chi-Square* analysis yielded a *P-Value* of 0.002, which is significantly lower than the threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Conclusion: There is a statistically significant relationship between mothers' knowledge of food nutrition and the incidence of stunting at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek. Consequently, community health centers are highly encouraged to intensify periodic educational programs and design engaging health promotional media regarding toddler nutrition.

To cite this article: Apriani, F., Andriani, R., Damayanti, S., Satria, O., Nasution, N., Aulia, Y., & Danti, I. (2026). The Relationship Between Maternal Knowledge of Food Nutrition and the Incidence of Stunting at the Padang Rubek UPTD Health Center. *Journal of Health Empowerment and Interprofessional Practice*, 2(3), 108-115. <https://doi.org/10.58723/jheip.v2i2.96>

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INTRODUCTION

Nutritional problems in early childhood, particularly among toddlers, represent a crucial, complex public health issue that requires serious intervention in Indonesia (KEMENKES, 2020). The toddler phase is a golden age of growth, where optimal nutritional fulfillment early in life especially during the first 1,000 Days of Life (HPK) plays a definitive role in determining the quality of a child's future growth and development. If nutritional needs during this crucial phase are not adequately met, children become highly vulnerable to chronic growth faltering, widely known as stunting (WHO (World Health Organization), 2025).

Within the family scope, mothers hold a vital role and serve as the frontline in ensuring that children receive a balanced nutritional intake (Winarni et al., 2024). A mother's behavior and decisions regarding selecting, preparing, and serving food are heavily influenced by her level of nutritional knowledge (Lestari et al., 2024). Low maternal nutritional knowledge both regarding the

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diversity of food ingredients and proper nutrient fulfillment can disrupt the toddler's growth process (Perwitasari & Nurita, 2023). The long-term consequence of this lack of knowledge is the emergence of physical development barriers in children, which manifests as stunting. (Palupi et al., 2023)

This phenomenon has become a serious concern within the working area of UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek. Based on data as of April 2025, there has been an increasing trend in stunting cases among toddlers in this region. This condition indicates that the issue of child nutrition fulfillment in the community still requires special attention (Amalia et al., 2019). Sociodemographically, the maternal characteristics in this area are dominated by housewives (IRT) with varying levels of education. Limited access to information and a lack of proper understanding regarding balanced nutrition at the family level are suspected to be major factors driving the high risk of growth disorders among toddlers at this health facility (Daracantika, 2021).

Although theoretically a mother's nutritional knowledge is closely correlated with a child's growth status, facts on the ground often show dynamic and varied conditions (Mulyaningrum et al., 2021). Therefore, an objective scientific study is urgently needed to map out the extent to which a mother's understanding of nutrition affects her child's physical condition in that region (Saputra et al., 2025).

This study is supported by previous research, which yielded consistent results showing that the level of maternal nutritional knowledge is significantly associated with the incidence of stunting in children. In the first journal by (Langi et al., 2019) at the Kawangkoan Health Center, Minahasa, the results showed that maternal knowledge ($p = 0.01$) and exclusive breastfeeding practices ($p = 0.02$) had a significant relationship with stunting in toddlers aged 2–5 years. Similar findings were reported in the second journal by (I. Maharani, 2023) at the Leuwisari Health Center, Tasikmalaya, which demonstrated a highly significant relationship between maternal nutritional knowledge and stunting in infants under two years old (baduta) aged 6–23 months with a p -value = 0.000, where the majority of mothers had poor knowledge and 57.4% of the children experienced stunting. Lastly, the third journal by (Hasnawati et al., 2021) at the Lawawoi Health Center, Sidrap, further reinforced these findings through a bivariate analysis that resulted in a p -value = 0.02, where 70% of mothers possessed poor knowledge and the majority of toddlers aged 12–59 months fell into the severely stunted nutritional status category.

The gap analysis in this study maps a significant discrepancy between the ideal theoretical conditions and the actual facts found on the ground. Theoretically, mothers who are unemployed or status-coded as housewives (IRT) should have substantially more free time to focus on nurturing, monitoring growth, and managing a variety of balanced nutritional menus for their toddlers at home (Mahfudloh et al., 2025). However, the reality within the working area of UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek shows that despite the majority of respondents being housewives (80%), the incidence of stunting among toddlers remains remarkably significant, reaching 21%. This gap indicates that a mother's availability of free time does not automatically guarantee a good nutritional status for the child if it is not accompanied by an adequate capacity of nutritional knowledge (Sholecha et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is an educational gap between formal schooling and specific nutritional understanding; although most mothers are senior high school graduates (57%) who are assumed to absorb information more easily the percentage of mothers possessing a "Good" category of nutritional knowledge is still relatively low at only 32%, while the remainder falls into the sufficient and poor categories. This cognitive gap triggers errors in nutritional parenting patterns and contributes directly to the increasing trend of stunting cases as of April 2025.

The rationality of conducting this study is based on the urgency of the golden age of child growth, the strategic cognitive role of mothers, and the sociological paradox regarding the trend of cases on the ground (Kurniawati et al., 2024). The toddler phase, particularly during the first 1,000 Days of Life (HPK), represents a critical window of opportunity that determines a child's future quality of life, where nutritional failure during this period leads to irreversible impacts on permanent physical and cognitive development (stunting) (Fatmawati et al., 2022). Within the household, the mother is the primary decision-maker controlling the quality of the child's food intake, a choice heavily driven by her level of nutritional knowledge. Examining nutritional knowledge levels is highly rational because this variable is an upstream factor that can be actively modified through educational interventions (Rahmadhita, 2020). Rationally, this study is urgently needed at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek due to an increasing trend in stunting cases as of April 2025, coupled with

a sociological paradox where the majority of mothers are housewives (80%) and senior high school graduates (57%). On paper, these mothers should theoretically have the time and ability to absorb nutritional information well, yet the actual stunting rate on the ground remains substantial at 21%.

The purpose of this study is to analyze and evaluate the empirical relationship between mothers' knowledge of food nutrition and the incidence of stunting among toddlers within the working area of UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025.

METHOD

This study applies a quantitative approach utilizing an analytical observational research design with a *cross-sectional* approach. The participants involved in this study consist of mothers who have children under five years old (toddlers) and were visiting the Pediatric Clinic at the UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek. The target population in this study encompasses all mothers who have toddlers registered and residing within the working area of the UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek, with a grand total of 297 people. The sampling technique implemented is *accidental sampling*. Based on the calculation, the sample size was rounded up to ensure proper population representation and was finalized at 75 respondents. The measurement tool used to assess the maternal knowledge variable is a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 closed-ended items with a dichotomous scale of "True" or "False" answers. Based on the validity test (Pearson Product Moment correlation, $\alpha = 0.05$), all 20 questionnaire items were declared valid because $r_{count} > r_{table}$. Meanwhile, the reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha yielded a score of 0.812 (> 0.60), confirming that the questionnaire is highly reliable and consistent to be used as a research instrument. Meanwhile, the assessment for Stunting Incidence is determined by the Anthropometric index of Height-for-Age (HAZ/TBU) or Length-for-Age (LAZ/PBU) using the Ministry of Health (Kemenkes, 2020) Z-score standards. The entire sequence of primary data collection and fieldwork operations was successfully completed, running from May 25 to June 25, 2025.

Univariate analysis is applied to provide a descriptive overview of the frequency distribution and percentage of the demographic characteristics of the respondents (highest education level and employment status), the level of maternal nutritional knowledge, and the percentage rate of toddler *stunting* incidence at the research location. Bivariate analysis aims to verify whether a significant statistical correlation exists between the independent and dependent variables using the Chi-Square Test.

The scientific scope of this study is focused within the fields of Pediatric Nursing and Community Health Nursing, with a geographical research boundary restricted to the Pediatric Clinic area of UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek, Nagan Raya Regency, during the 2025 period. This methodology is bound by the inherent limitation of a *cross-sectional* design, which means that definitive causal relationships between variables cannot be fully established because the independent and dependent variables are measured at the exact same point in time. Another limitation stems from the use of *accidental sampling*, which lowers the generalizability of the findings compared to *probability sampling* methods. Furthermore, this study narrows its variable scope solely to maternal nutritional knowledge, thereby leaving out other influential variables that theoretically impact *stunting* incidence, such as family economic status, dietary protein intake, history of Low Birth Weight (LBW), environmental sanitation quality, and history of recurring infectious diseases in children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Respondents Characteristic

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Respondents Based on Characteristics at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025 (n=75)

Respondents Characteristic	n	%
Education Level		
Junior High School	4	5%
Senior High School	43	57%
Diploma	13	18%
Bachelor	15	20%

Total	75	100%
Occupation Status		
Employed	15	20%
Housewife	60	80%
Total	75	100%

Based on Table 1 above, the majority of respondents have a Senior High School (SMA) background, totaling 43 respondents (57%). This is followed by 15 respondents (20%) with a Bachelor's Degree (S1), 13 respondents (18%) with a Diploma Degree (D.III), and 4 respondents (5%) with a Junior High School (SMP) education. Furthermore, based on the table above, the majority of the respondents are "unemployed/housewives," accounting for 60 respondents (80%), while 15 respondents (20%) have an "employed status."

Univariate analysis

Table 2. Maternal Knowledge Level on Food Nutrition at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025 (n=75)

Category	n	%
Good	24	32%
Sufficient	27	36%
Poor	24	32%
Total	75	100%

Based on Table 2 above, the majority of respondents fall into the "sufficient" category, totaling 27 respondents (36%), followed by the "good" and "poor" categories with 24 respondents (32%) each.

Table 3. Incidence of Stunting at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025 (n=75)

Category	n	%
Stunted	16	21%
Normal	59	79%
Total	75	100%

Based on Table 3 above, the majority of respondents fall into the "not stunted" category, accounting for 59 respondents (79%), while 16 respondents (21%) are in the "stunted" category.

Bivariate analysis

Table 4. The Relationship Between Maternal Knowledge on Food Nutrition and the Incidence of Stunting at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025 (n=75)

Maternal Knowledge	Stunting		Normal		Total		P Value
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Good	2	3%	22	29%	24	32%	0.002
Sufficient	3	4%	24	32%	27	36%	
Poor	11	14%	13	18%	24	32%	
Total	16	21%	59	79%	75	100%	

Based on Table 4 above, the majority of the 75 respondents show that among mothers in the "sufficient" knowledge category, 3 respondents (4%) have toddlers categorized as stunted, while 24 respondents (32%) have toddlers in the not stunted category. Furthermore, among mothers in the "good" knowledge category, 2 respondents (3%) have toddlers in the stunted category, and 22 respondents (29%) have toddlers in the not stunted category. Finally, among mothers in the "poor" knowledge category, 11 respondents (14%) have toddlers in the stunted category, while 13 respondents (18%) have toddlers in the not stunted category.

The results of the Chi-Square test indicate that there is a significant relationship between maternal knowledge of food nutrition and the incidence of stunting, with a *P*-Value of $0.002 < 0.05$.

Discussion

The results of the study conducted by the researcher indicate that the majority of respondents fall into the "sufficient" category, totaling 27 respondents (36%), followed by the "good" and "poor" categories with 24 respondents (32%) each. An individual's knowledge is generally acquired through formal education, life experiences, and information obtained from mass media.

Furthermore, an individual's attitudes and perceptions can be influenced by their level of knowledge (Wahana, 2016). Enhancing maternal knowledge plays a crucial role in efforts to overcome the problem of stunting. Adequate knowledge enables mothers to make nutritious food choices, thereby ensuring the child's dietary intake is guaranteed. This, in turn, contributes to the improvement of the child's nutritional status and helps them achieve optimal growth (Ekawidayani et al., 2022).

Based on the highest education level, the data shows that the majority of respondents have a Senior High School (SMA) education background, totaling 43 respondents (57%). This data proves that knowledge can be influenced by the mother's level of education. Stunting prevention behaviors must continuously be reinforced by seeking information and sharing experiences regarding stunting prevention for their children (Murti et al., n.d.). This is vital because variations in nutritional status yield different impacts on each child's development; if balanced nutritional needs are not met properly, the achievement of the child's growth and development will be hindered (Kurniawati et al., 2024). A lack of maternal nutritional knowledge can be one of the determinants of a toddler's nutritional status, as it dictates the mother's attitude or behavior in selecting food to be consumed by the toddler (Nugroho et al., 2021). Mothers with poor nutritional knowledge tend to provide inadequate nutritional intake for their children, which consequently leads to the children experiencing nutritional problems such as stunting (Saputra et al., 2025).

Based on the results of the study, it can be determined that the majority of respondents fall into the "not stunted" category, accounting for 59 respondents (79%), while 16 respondents (21%) are in the "stunted" category. Stunting is a condition where a person's height is shorter compared to the height of others in general (of the same age). Stunted (short stature), or a low height/length-for-age, is used as an indicator of chronic malnutrition, which reflects a long-term history of malnutrition in toddlers (Rahayu et al., 2018). Various factors can cause stunting, including insufficient nutritional intake over the long term, recurring infections, suboptimal parenting and caregiving practices, as well as low access to clean water, sanitation, and basic healthcare services (KEMENKES, 2018). Preventing stunting is crucial during the golden period, namely the first 1,000 days of life. This encompasses the period from when the child is in the womb until the child reaches 2 years of age. The role of the family is also vital during this phase. This represents a critical period that determines how the child will grow and develop into a healthy, intelligent, and optimal individual in the future (BKKBN (Badan Kependudukan dan keluarga Berencana), 2022).

The results of this study indicate that among the 75 respondents, mothers with a "sufficient" level of knowledge who have toddlers categorized as stunted total 3 respondents (4%), while those with toddlers in the not stunted category total 24 respondents (32%). Furthermore, among mothers in the "good" knowledge category, 2 respondents (3%) have toddlers in the stunted category, and 22 respondents (29%) have toddlers in the not stunted category. Finally, among mothers in the "poor" knowledge category, 11 respondents (14%) have toddlers in the stunted category, while 13 respondents (18%) have toddlers in the not stunted category. Based on the Chi-Square test results, it is determined that there is a significant relationship between maternal knowledge of food nutrition and the incidence of stunting, with a P-Value of $0.002 < 0.05$. This study aligns with the research findings of (I. Maharani, 2023), which reported a P-value = $0.000 < 0.05$, meaning that there is a relationship between maternal nutritional knowledge and the incidence of stunting among toddlers under two years old (baduta) in the working area of PKM Leuwisari, Tasikmalaya Regency in 2023. The findings of (Langi et al., 2019) are also consistent with this study, demonstrating a significant relationship between maternal knowledge and the incidence of stunting at the Kawangkoan Public Health Center, with a P-value of $p = 0.01 < 0.05$. Similarly, a study conducted by (Hasnawati et al., 2021) supports these results, as it obtained a P-value = $0.02 < 0.05$, which signifies a significant relationship between maternal knowledge and the incidence of stunting at the Lawawoi Public Health Center, Sidrap Regency in 2021.

According to the researcher, the significant relationship between the level of maternal knowledge about food nutrition and the incidence of stunting at the Padang Rubek Public Health Center stems from the mothers' lack of understanding regarding the nutritional values found in appropriate foods necessary to meet their children's nutritional needs (Winarni et al., 2024). This is further influenced by the fact that the majority of the mothers' highest education level is Senior High School (SMA). Additionally, the researcher notes that this could be due to the fact that the majority

of the mothers are unemployed (housewives), which may limit their opportunities to update their information, resulting in a lack of broader knowledge and insight (Palupi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, specific household conditions contribute to the low understanding and application of proper nutrition among mothers in the working area of the Padang Rubek Public Health Center. As housewives who often have to handle various domestic chores simultaneously, mothers' time and energy are frequently depleted, causing attention to the nutritional quality of children's food to often be neglected (C. Maharani et al., 2023). When children refuse to eat or behave fussily, mothers tend to take shortcuts for the sake of practicality, such as providing instant snack foods or low-nutrient junk food easily purchased at nearby stalls to fill the child's stomach. This actually causes children to lose their appetite for main meals rich in animal protein and iron, which are crucial components for stunting prevention (Astuti et al., 2020).

In addition, the use of gadgets during children's mealtime is often used as a practical strategy so that the feeding process finishes quickly without drama. However, this habit can divert the child's attention, disrupt natural satiety regulation, and eliminate the momentum of educational interaction between mother and child (Amalia et al., 2019). The combination of a Senior High School education level, limited mobility due to the status of a housewife, domestic chores, reliance on instant snack foods, and the use of gadgets during meals creates suboptimal feeding practices, which ultimately explains why some mothers in the working area of the Padang Rubek Public Health Center still possess vulnerable knowledge and nutritional practices that directly contribute to the risk of stunting incidents in toddlers.

Implications

Nursing Practice Implications: Nurses need to design targeted educational programs that do not just distribute pamphlets, but actively train mothers on physical meal preparation, dietary diversification, and routine anthropometric tracking.

Public Health Policy Implications: Nutritional counseling must become a mandatory step during every toddler visit, ensuring that mothers with low educational backgrounds receive intensive, easily understandable guidance on childcare nutrition.

Research contribution

Theoretical Contribution: This study enriches the literature on community nursing and maternal-child health by providing empirical, localized data regarding the direct impact of maternal cognitive factors on physical child degradation (stunting) within rural public health center scopes in Nagan Raya Regency.

Practical Contribution: It serves as an evidence-based diagnostic tool for local health authorities to justify the allocation of resources, budget, and manpower specifically toward maternal health education programs, rather than relying solely on supplementary feeding (PMT) distributions.

Limitations

Methodological Limitations: The use of a cross-sectional approach prevents this study from establishing a direct chronological cause-and-effect timeline between the variables, as both knowledge and stunting were measured at a single point in time. Additionally, the *accidental sampling* method limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader national scale.

Variable Limitations: This study focused exclusively on maternal nutritional knowledge as an isolated factor. It did not statistically control or analyze other highly influential confounding variables such as household economic status, sanitation and clean water access, history of low birth weight (LBW), and the frequency of recurring infectious diseases in the toddlers.

Suggestions

For UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek: It is highly recommended to establish a specialized, routine "Nutritional Class for Mothers" (Kelas Ibu Balita) led by nurses and nutritionists. This program should prioritize interactive demonstrations on preparing affordable, balanced local foods and focus heavily on mothers with low education levels.

For the Respondents (Mothers): Mothers are strongly encouraged to actively participate in Posyandu activities, seek health consultations proactively during health visits, and utilize digital or community media to increase their awareness regarding childcare nutrition and growth tracking.

CONCLUSION

There is a statistically significant relationship between maternal knowledge on food nutrition and the incidence of stunting at UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek in 2025. This is proven by the Chi-Square test result, which yielded a *P*-Value of 0.002 ($\alpha = 0.05$), indicating that lower maternal nutritional knowledge and limited access to updated health information significantly contribute to higher rates of stunting in toddlers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses their deepest gratitude to STIKes Medika Seramoe Barat, Universitas Bunda Thamrin, STIKes Flora Medan, and the Head and staff of UPTD Puskesmas Padang Rubek for all the support, facilities, and permissions provided during this study, as well as sincere appreciation to all mothers of toddlers who cooperatively participated as respondents so that this research on stunting could be successfully completed.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

FA and RA conceived and designed the study. SA and OS were responsible for data collection and fieldwork at the health center. NN and YA performed the statistical data analysis and interpreted the results. ID drafted the manuscript and handled the revisions. All authors reviewed, edited, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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