News

As famine looms in Gaza, pregnant women and newborns face life-threatening health risks



Israel's catastrophic aid blockade on Gaza has gone on for over two months, in which all supplies – including food, medicine, shelter and fuel – have been cut off. ©UNFPA Palestine/Media Clinic

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GAZA STRIP, Occupied Palestinian Territory – "There's a severe shortage of food and essential medicines, particularly during this siege," said a doctor at Al-Awda Hospital, in Gaza's central Deir Al-Balah governorate. "It's had a devastating impact on pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers

and children in general.”

The doctor spoke to UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, after more than two months of Israel’s catastrophic aid blockade on Gaza, in which all supplies – including food, medicine, shelter and fuel – were cut off. Reports show that one in every five people is now facing starvation; for an estimated 55,000 pregnant women, each missed meal increases the risk of miscarriages, stillbirths and undernourished newborns.

“We are witnessing a significant increase in cases of low birth weight babies, directly linked to maternal malnutrition and anaemia during pregnancy,” continued the doctor, who requested to remain anonymous for safety reasons.

Aya Hassan, currently living in the Deir Al-Balah displacement camp in central Gaza said, “We are surviving on food provided by community kitchens. Clinics distribute nutritional supplements for pregnant women, and I attend follow-ups on a daily basis because I’m afraid of developing vitamin deficiencies. The situation is very difficult.”

With barely any access to clean water or hygiene facilities, infectious diseases and sexually transmitted infections are also reportedly on the rise, including among pregnant women, which makes them even more vulnerable to complications.

“The lack of hygiene products is one of the main contributors to these conditions,” the doctor added. “We are also facing a critical shortage of supplies, including a complete lack of maternal health medicines, which has led to a rise in miscarriages.”

A health system on its knees



Relentless attacks on hospitals, health facilities and medical staff have left Gaza's healthcare system in ruins. ©UNFPA Palestine/Media Clinic

Relentless attacks on hospitals, health facilities and medical staff have left the healthcare system in ruins. Nasser Hospital in southern Gaza – one of only eight hospitals still partially functioning – was hit by an Israeli airstrike on 13 May, the fourth time it has come under fire since October 2023. Less than 24 hours later, the European Hospital in Khan Younis was bombed too.

Access to essential services is critically constrained while supplies for safe deliveries and newborn care are stuck at the border. Amid these dire conditions, almost 11,000 pregnant women are already reported to be at risk of famine, and nearly 17,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women will need urgent treatment for acute malnutrition over the coming months. For many, the fallout is devastating.

"I treated a woman who had struggled with infertility for nearly seven years," continued the doctor at Al-Awda Hospital. "She finally became pregnant during the war, but due to the impacts of the siege, a lack of proper nutrition, and the trauma of bombardment when she was forced to flee, she went into premature labour and lost her baby."

UNFPA estimates that one in three pregnancies are now considered high-risk, and one in five newborns are born preterm or underweight, requiring specialist care that is increasingly unavailable. Only five hospitals are still providing maternity care across the entire Gaza Strip.



Displaced women and their family members can seek healthcare services at Al-Awda Health and Community Association in Gaza's Deir Al Balah governorate. ©UNFPA Palestine/Media Clinic

A spiralling humanitarian catastrophe

UNFPA has over 190 trucks loaded with supplies that are urgently needed in Gaza, but which have been denied entry at the border during the blockade. These include mobile maternity units, ultrasounds and portable incubators that are crucial for premature newborns, hygiene and shelter supplies, and maternal health medicines, including those essential for managing obstetric emergencies.



Healthcare services continue at the Al-Awda Health and Community Association, which is attached to the hospital in Gaza's Deir Al Balah. ©UNFPA Palestine/Media Clinic

At a maternity unit set up in a container by UNFPA at the Al-Awda Health and Community Association, 38-year-old Wafa told UNFPA, "This is my seventh child. I became pregnant with him in March 2024, during the war. The beginning of my pregnancy was extremely difficult due to malnutrition."

Displaced with her family, she explained, "I had to rely on IV fluids at Al-Awda Hospital and experienced preterm labour early in the eighth month. However, the medical team monitored my condition closely and provided consistent care, and I eventually gave birth at the hospital."

In the first two months of the ceasefire, UNFPA estimates to have reached 146,000 women and girls with reproductive health services and more than 100,000 people with protection services, through health facilities and mobile clinics. But as the blockade has rendered even the most essential humanitarian assistance all but impossible, the doctor at Al-Awda Hospital said, "Our deepest hope is for this war to end."



Damage in a displacement settlement following Israeli bombardment in the Al Mawasi area of Khan Younis, which left dozens dead and injured.©UNFPA Palestine/Media Clinic

In 2025, UNFPA is seeking $99 million to address ongoing and emerging needs in Palestine, but as of April, just $12.5 million has been received.

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