

# Is scurvy really making a comeback in the UK?

October 14 2019, by Ali Hill

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Many fruits and vegetables are high in vitamin C. Credit: margouillat photo/Shutterstock

Scurvy is on the rise in the U.K. and picky eating might be the cause, a recent report in [Metro](#) suggests. But is this something we should worry

about? As with most things, it's not as clear cut as it might seem.

[Scurvy](#) occurs when you don't have enough [vitamin C](#) in your diet. Symptoms include feeling more tired than usual, having swollen or bleeding gums and bruising easily. But it takes [one to three months](#) with very little vitamin C to reach this point.

Vitamin C is in so many foods that it's actually quite difficult to get [scurvy](#). Of course, most people know that oranges, limes, lemons and kiwi fruits contain lots of vitamin C, but new potatoes, broccoli and peppers are also good sources. Still, it's not impossible to get scurvy, as official NHS figures show.

In 2007-08, [61 people in England who were hospitalized had scurvy](#). That figure jumped to [128 in 2016-17](#)—a more than doubling of cases.

But putting it into context, in 2016-17, [there were 16m hospital admissions](#) overall, 3m more than in 2007-8. That means 0.0008% of hospital admissions involved scurvy. It is an increase, but in the grand scheme of things, not a national calamity.

## The real issue

Scurvy is only one measure of an inadequate diet. Rates of malnutrition show a much bigger increase. In 2007-8, there were [2,702 cases of malnutrition in hospital admissions](#). In 2016-17, that number more than tripled to 9,006.

Malnutrition doesn't just affect [underweight people](#)—you can be overweight or obese and be malnourished. It might be that you're eating a lot of food but you're not getting enough nutrients. Or you could eat the right amount of food in terms of calories, but the wrong type of food in terms of nutrients. Eating too much of a particular nutrient can also be

a problem, as you may end up consuming toxic levels of vitamins and minerals. All these things can lead to malnutrition.

Rates of malnutrition also differ by age. Appetite reduces as you get older, so it can be common in older people. Most of the people identified in the Metro article are millennials, but looking at the official figures, there isn't much difference in rates of scurvy between different age groups. So being a millennial doesn't make you more likely to get scurvy.

Of all the causes, inequality is the one we should really be focusing on. Last year, it was [reported](#) that 14m people in the U.K. live in poverty. That's more than a fifth of the population. The same report states that [child poverty](#) has risen by more than half a million over the previous five years. That is a huge section of the population who might not be able to access or afford a healthy diet.

We shouldn't be dealing with [malnutrition](#) or scurvy in 2019, but we are. What we can change is how we respond to it at both a personal and societal level. As the Metro article says, we need to have more understanding and less judgment about what people are eating. But we also need to acknowledge and address the social inequalities responsible for these "Victorian illnesses." Until we do, scurvy will continue to exist.

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