

Promote a Holistic Approach to Reducing Vitamin A Deficiency in Africa

Vitamin A deficiency (VAD) affects over 43% of pre-school aged children in Africa. The main cause is inadequate intake of vitamin A due to poor diet. Frequent infections can contribute to VAD by decreasing appetite, reducing absorption and increasing needs for vitamin A.

Vitamin A deficiency weakens the immune system, increases the risk of disease and death, causes visual impairment in children and night blindness in pregnant women and children.

An integrated approach to addressing this serious public health problem consists of three strategies:



Photo Credit: R. Kapinga

1. Vitamin A supplementation (VAS)

- Provision of vitamin A capsules twice a year to children under 5 increases child survival and reduces child mortality by an average of 24%

However:

- The benefits in reducing VAD are short-term (2-3 months)
- National investments in VAS are often limited as campaigns in many countries are largely donor dependant

2. Food fortification

- Fortified foods can reach Africa's growing population with vitamin A and other essential nutrients

However :

- Access to fortified foods may be limited by availability and purchasing power, particularly in rural areas
- As young children can only eat small quantities of fortified foods, fortification needs to be combined with other interventions to reduce VAD

3. Dietary diversification

- Many vitamin A rich foods such as orange-fleshed sweetpotatoes, mangoes, papaya, pumpkin, dark green leafy vegetables, eggs, liver and milk, are available in Africa

However:

- There is need to promote and raise awareness about vitamin A rich foods such as orange-fleshed sweetpotato which are easy to produce and can be easily accessed by households of all social categories
- Long-term investment in nutrition education is required for widespread impact

Reaching Agents of Change (RAC) Project advocates for increased investment in orange-fleshed sweetpotato food-based approaches to combat vitamin A deficiency (VAD) among children less than five years old and their mothers. RAC also builds institutional capacity to design and implement gender sensitive projects to ensure wide access and utilization of orange-fleshed sweetpotato in selected African Countries. Its efforts contribute to the broader Sweetpotato for Profit and Health Initiative (SPHI) which aims to improve the lives of 10 million African families by 2020.

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