

Vitamin A has a role to play in combatting malaria in children

Vitamin A supplements can reduce malaria cases in children by one-third, study finds.

In malaria-endemic areas, Vitamin A supplements - which cost about 2 U.S. cents each - can help reduce infections in children by one-third, according to a study published in the *Malaria Journal*, IRIN reports.

The study analyzed results from previous studies conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Papua New Guinea since 1995. It found that Vitamin A supplements decreased malaria cases by one-third in Papua New Guinea and Burkina Faso.

Peter Olumese of the WHO's Global Malaria Programme said although the relationship between Vitamin A deficiency and malaria requires more research, it is clear that Vitamin A supplements help to prevent a range of infectious diseases in children. "We do not need to wait for all the answers," Olumese said. "While waiting on results [of further studies into the link], Vitamin A supplements can be used to decrease morbidity and mortality in children, including those at risk of malaria."

Highest levels of Vitamin A deficiency

According to the WHO, children younger than age five in Africa and Southeast Asia had the highest levels of Vitamin A deficiency between 1995 and 2005. UNICEF estimates it reaches 70% of children worldwide at risk of Vitamin A deficiency with supplements twice a year. But that means that one-third of children might not receive the minimum amount, Olumese said.

"Vitamin A supplement programming is often run as a donor-funded project and is not tied in with national child health programmes. When donors leave, so do the Vitamin A supplements," he said.

In addition, government health budgets rarely allocate sufficient funds for nutrients, said Banda Ndiaye of the non-profit Micronutrient Initiative, which helps governments carry out twice-yearly micronutrient campaigns. "Resource allocation is very competitive and the basis of allocation may have as much to do with which constituency has more influence [rather] than what is needed most."

"At a 2008 malnutrition conference hosted by the Copenhagen Consensus Center, economists calculated that an annual \$60-million investment in micronutrients, especially Vitamin A and zinc, would yield annual benefits of more than \$1 billion, including health care cost savings," IRIN writes (IRIN 6/25).