

## Screening for immune system nutrients encouraged

Doctors and nurses should routinely screen under-nourished patients for deficiencies in key micronutrients involved in the immune system, says a panel appointed by the Academy of Science of SA.

By [Tamar Kahn](#) 16 Aug 2013



The panel of experts investigated the best ways of measuring whether South Africans were getting enough of six vitamins and trace elements vital for the immune system. They considered vitamins A and D, folate, selenium, zinc and iron.

Their work builds on a previous report by the academy, published in 2007, that considered how nutrition influenced the immune system. That study was triggered by the extensive public debate over the role of nutritional supplements in combating HIV and tuberculosis.

The issue was highly contentious at the time, thanks to the attitude of former health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, who eschewed antiretroviral medicines in favour of untested remedies based on garlic, beetroot and lemon. The latest academy report on micronutrients concluded that many South Africans, not just vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant mothers, were deficient in the six vitamins and minerals they studied.

### Deficiencies

For example, people who were overweight and eating food high in fat and sugar but low in micronutrients were also at risk of vitamin and mineral deficiencies. The panel recommended the government regularly assess the micronutrient status of the population.

"We believe our general micronutrient status is low despite the fortification of maize and wheat flour. There has been little assessment of its impact. Do we even know whether companies are complying (with the regulations)?" asked the chairman of the scientific panel convened by the academy, John Pettifor, professor emeritus in the department of paediatrics at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital.

Since 2003, the milling industry has been required to fortify maize meal and wheat flour with eight micronutrients: vitamins A, B1, B2, B6, B3, folic acid, zinc, pyridoxine and iron.

"The South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey published last week was a good starting point for a regular assessment of the nation's nutritional status," said Pettifor. "Micronutrients were not only essential for a healthy immune system, but also played a role in protecting people from non-communicable diseases later in life," he added.

Micronutrients were essential for the growth and development of babies and children, and therefore youngsters with a poor diet were at increased risk of stunting, he said.

Source: Business Day via I-Net Bridge

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