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How Vitamins Could Change The World

New Study Finds Billions of People's Lives Could Be Drastically Improved if Basic Vitamins and Minerals Were Added to Foodstuffs

([CSRwire](#)) Davos, Switzerland – A new report from UNICEF and the Micronutrient Initiative finds that lack of basic vitamins and minerals in the diet is damaging the health of one-third of the world's people and holding back the economic development of virtually every country in the southern hemisphere.

Few outside specialist circles are aware of what vitamin and mineral deficiency means for individuals and nations. But the report, released today at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, finds that a lack of key vitamins and minerals is responsible for impairing intellectual development, compromising immune systems, provoking birth defects and consigning some 2 billion people to lives below their physical and mental potential.

The report summarizes the findings of nutrition "damage assessment" studies in 80 nations, throwing new light on vitamin and mineral deficiency levels that are almost impossible to detect without laboratory tests.

The report finds that:

- Iron deficiency impairs mental development in young children and is lowering national IQs. It also undermines adult productivity, with estimated losses of 2% of GDP in the worst affected countries.
- Vitamin A deficiency compromises the immune systems of approximately 40% of children under five in the developing world, leading to the deaths of 1 million youngsters each year.
- Iodine deficiency in pregnancy causes as many as 20 million babies a year to be born mentally impaired.
- Severe iron deficiency anaemia causes the deaths of an estimated 50,000 women a year during childbirth.
- Folate deficiency causes approximately 200,000 severe birth defects every year and is associated with roughly 1 in 10 adult deaths from heart disease.

The report states that the effects of vitamin and micronutrient deficiency (VMD) on adults, particularly on women, are subtle and insidious. The effects on nations, and on economic development, are only just beginning to be measured. But at the heart of the VMD problem is the fact that it is in the vital, vulnerable, earliest months of life that poor nutrition has its most devastating and durable effects.

"It's no longer acceptable to simply identify symptoms of micronutrient deficiency in individuals and then treat them," said UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy. "We have to protect entire populations against the devastating consequences of vitamin and mineral deficiency, especially children. In the industrialized world we've been doing it for years. There is no excuse for not reaching every human being with these simple but life-saving micronutrients. We know what needs doing, we just have to do it."

The Solutions

The report says that whole populations can be protected against vitamin and micronutrient deficiencies by tested and inexpensive methods. Those solutions include:

Food Fortification: Adding essential vitamins and minerals to foods that are regularly consumed by most people (such as flour, salt, sugar, cooking oil and margarine). This measure costs only a few cents per person per year.

Supplementation: Reaching out to vulnerable groups (particularly children and women of childbearing age) with vitamin and mineral supplements in the form of tablets, capsules and syrups. This measure costs only a few cents per person per year.

Education: Informing communities about the kinds of foods that can increase the intake and absorption of needed vitamins and minerals.

Disease Control: Controlling diseases like malaria, measles, diarrhoea and parasitic infections, which can also help the body absorb and retain essential vitamins and minerals.

These are the methods that brought the VMD problem under control in industrialized nations decades ago. But UN goals to bring vitamin and mineral deficiency under control in the developing world will not be achieved, the report concludes, without a more ambitious, visionary and systematic commitment to "deploy known solutions on the same scale as the known problems."

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) was set up to foster private-public projects to fill the micronutrients gap.

According to Jay Naidoo, Chairman of the Board of the Development Bank of Southern Africa as well as the current chair of GAIN: "The nutrition gap is one we can close immediately, simply and relatively cheaply." Naidoo commented, as an example, that if wheat flour in the 75 most needy countries were fortified with iron and folic acid, iron deficiency could be reduced by 10%, and birth defects could be lowered by a third. Such fortification would cost approximately US\$ 85 million, which is about 4 cents per person.

"As a result, we estimate these countries would gain US\$ 275 million in increased productivity and US\$ 200 million from the enhanced earning potential," Naidoo said. "There are many other examples to emphasize that public-private partnerships to invest in food fortification are investments not only in health, but also in national economies."

The report concludes: "When so much could be achieved for so many, and for so little, it would be a matter of global disgrace if vitamin and mineral deficiency were not brought under control in the years immediately ahead."

For a copy of the report visit our website at:

http://www.weforum.org/pdf/Initiatives/GHI_2004_UNICEF_MI.pdf

Note to Editors

The Micronutrient Initiative (MI) is an international organization that provides technical and operational support to governments, food industries and non-governmental organizations in Asia, Africa and Latin America to undertake large-scale food fortification and dietary supplementation programmes. MI is a founding donor of GAIN. www.micronutrient.org

Incorporated as a Swiss foundation in 2003, GAIN provides resources to National Fortification Alliances of governments, industry and civil society to implement large-scale food fortification programmes that reach low-income, at-risk populations. GAIN is funded primarily by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, bilateral aid agencies and MI. www.gainhealth.org

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