Vitamin A supplementation in infants and children 6–59 months of age

Summary

Vitamin A deficiency affects about 19 million pregnant women and 190 million preschool-age children, mostly from the World Health Organization (WHO) regions of Africa and South-East Asia. Infants and children have increased vitamin A requirements to support rapid growth and to help them combat infections. Member States have requested guidance from WHO on the effects and safety of vitamin A supplementation in infants and children 6–59 months of age as a public health strategy in support of their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

WHO has developed the present evidence-informed recommendations using the procedures outlined in the WHO handbook for guideline development. The steps in this process included: (i) identification of priority questions and outcomes; (ii) retrieval of the evidence; (iii) assessment and synthesis of the evidence; (iv) formulation of recommendations, including future research priorities; and (v) planning for dissemination, implementation, impact evaluation and updating of the guideline. The Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) methodology was followed to prepare evidence profiles related to preselected topics, based on up-to-date systematic reviews. An international, multidisciplinary group of experts participated in two WHO technical consultations, held in Geneva, Switzerland, on 19–20 October 2009 and 16–18 March 2011, to review and discuss the evidence and draft recommendation, and to vote on the strength of the recommendation, taking into consideration: (i) desirable and undesirable effects of this intervention; (ii) the quality of the available evidence; (iii) values and preferences related to the intervention in different settings; and (iv) the cost of options available to health-care workers in different settings. All guideline group members completed a Declaration of Interests Form before each meeting. An External Experts and Stakeholders Panel was involved throughout the process.

In settings where vitamin A deficiency is a public health problem, vitamin A supplementation is recommended in infants and children 6–59 months of age as a public health intervention to reduce child morbidity and mortality (strong recommendation). The quality of the available evidence for all-cause mortality was high, whereas for all other critical outcomes it was moderate to very low. The quality of the available evidence for outcomes in human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-positive children was moderate for all-cause mortality.

---

1 This publication is a WHO guideline. A WHO guideline is any document, whatever its title, containing WHO recommendations about health interventions, whether they be clinical, public health or policy interventions. A recommendation provides information about what policy-makers, health-care providers or patients should do. It implies a choice between different interventions that have an impact on health and that have ramifications for the use of resources. All publications containing WHO recommendations are approved by the WHO Guidelines Review Committee.