Approximately 1000 women die from pregnancy and childbirth complications worldwide every day. Vitamin A deficiency also affects about 19 million pregnant women, mostly from the World Health Organization (WHO) regions of Africa and South-East Asia. Vitamin A plays an important role in vision, growth and physical development, and immune function. Deficiency of vitamin A increases the risk of night blindness and other ocular conditions such as xerophthalmia. Member States have requested guidance from WHO on the effects and safety of vitamin A supplements for postpartum women as a public health strategy.

WHO has developed the present evidence-informed recommendation using 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; 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.

Vitamin A supplementation in postpartum women is not recommended as a public health intervention for the prevention of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality (strong recommendation). The quality of the available evidence for maternal mortality, maternal morbidity and adverse effects was graded as low or very low. The quality of evidence for all-cause infant mortality was high and for cause-specific infant mortality and morbidity was very low. Postpartum women should continue to receive adequate nutrition, which is best achieved through consumption of a balanced healthy diet.

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Summary

WHO Guideline
Vitamin A supplementation in postpartum women

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.