WHO Guideline

Vitamin A supplementation in pregnant women

Summary

Maternal mortality rates remain high, with approximately 1000 women dying from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth worldwide every day. Vitamin A deficiency affects about 19 million pregnant women, mostly from the WHO regions of Africa and South-East Asia. During pregnancy, vitamin A is essential for the health of the mother as well as for the health and development of the fetus. Member States have requested guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO) on the effects and safety of vitamin A supplementation in pregnant women as a public health strategy.

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 recommendations, and to vote on the strength of the recommendations, 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 pregnancy as part of routine antenatal care is not recommended for the prevention of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality (strong recommendation). In areas where vitamin A deficiency is a severe public health problem, vitamin A supplementation in pregnancy is recommended for the prevention of night blindness (strong recommendation). The quality of the available evidence for maternal mortality was found to be high, whereas for all other critical outcomes it was moderate.

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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.