

PRESS RELEASE

South Africa launches its first ever Vitamin “A” supplementation campaign

UNICEF says intervention is an important contributor to child survival

Pretoria, 9 September 2008 ... South has launched its first ever national Vitamin “A” campaign, which aims to reach a total of 4 million children over an intensive 12 day period ending on 20 September, 2008.

According to UNICEF, this is the first time that the Department of Health in South Africa has conducted an intervention of this scale, in all provinces, with the primary aim of increasing Vitamin “A” coverage rates. In select provinces, the campaign roll out will follow an integrated approach including vitamin A supplementation, deworming and some growth screening using Mid Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) tapes.

“Globally, it is estimated that the provision of twice yearly vitamin A supplements to children can contribute to the reduction of child mortality by 23%,” said Joan Matji, Senior Nutrition Specialist at UNICEF South Africa. “UNICEF estimates that in order to maximize the impact of Vitamin “A” supplementation on child mortality, at least 70% of children in South Africa need to be provided with vitamin A supplementation every 6 months, she added.”

Because of the prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies in South Africa, especially amongst the most vulnerable children and women, UNICEF has remained a partner to the Department of Health over the years in managing implementation of national high impact interventions to prevent further deterioration. “An example is the national flour fortification programme, which is now being introduced in other countries in the region,” Ms Matji said.

South Africa’s first national nutrition survey among children 6-71 months, found that 33.3 per cent of children are deficient in Vitamin “A”. This prevalence indicates that deficiency in Vitamin “A” is a serious health concern for the country. Since the effect of one capsule of vitamin A administered to a child lasts for only four to six months, health experts recommend that a supplement be provided twice yearly to children during the first 5 years of life.

The 2008 Vitamin “A” supplementation Campaign

A 1999 South Africa’s National Food Consumption Survey showed that most children appear to consume a diet low in energy and poor in protein quality and micronutrient density. It also found that one out of two children aged 1-9 years have an intake of approximately less than half the recommended level for Vitamin “A”. In response, routine supplementation to children aged 6 to 59 months and to post partum women has been implemented at South African health facilities as a policy since 2003.

UNICEF has actively supported every step of this first Vitamin “A” campaign by bringing in a technical expert to guide the planning phase, mobilizing partners such as the Micronutrient Initiative and the Canadian International Development Agency to secure vitamin A capsules, scissors and indelible ink,

and in documenting the campaign experience, including assessing the number of children reached, the costs and the impacts. UNICEF will also help determine the sustainability of this new intervention.

“UNICEF looks forward in future to supporting the implementation of a more integrated vitamin “A” supplementation programme that is part of an overall child survival package in order to truly accelerate high impact interventions in the country, “ Ms. Matji said.

The official launch of this campaign was undertaken by the National Minister of Health at J. Dumane Community Health Centre in Voslorus, Ekurhuleni, Gauteng Province.

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