

National vitamin A campaign

Delivering a lifesaving micronutrient to children in Bangladesh

Saiqa Siraj

Vitamin A deficiency is a public health concern all around the world, affecting children under five in more than half of all countries. In South Asia, which has one-fifth of the world’s population, 44-50% of pre-school children are affected by severe vitamin A deficiency (VAD). This causes visual impairment and night blindness, and weakens the immune system, putting a child at greater risk of disease and early death.

In 1973, to safeguard the health of children and provide them with this critical micronutrient, the government of Bangladesh initiated the ‘Nutritional Blindness Prevention Programme’, which evolved into the ‘National Vitamin A Plus Campaign’ (NVAC) in 2003. The programme has been a major success in reducing under-five mortality in the country and improving community awareness about VADs, foods rich in vitamin A, and vitamin A supplementation (VAS).

To ensure that no child gets left behind in receiving biannual doses of vitamin A, NVAC has initiated the targeted child-to-child search strategy proposed by Nutrition International. The unique approach tracks children residing in the 240 ‘hard-to-reach’ unions and administers VAS to them through door-to-door visits by healthcare providers.



PHOTO: LANKESWAR BARMA

With such targeted health and nutrition interventions, Bangladesh has made significant strides in improving child health and nutrition. The prevalence of VAD among preschool children of the country remains at 20.5%, much less than the world’s average.

However, with the advent of COVID-19, like many other developing nations, Bangladesh is facing a malnutrition crisis. A study conducted by the Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC) predicts chronic stunting to rise to 41% – a full ten-point increase over 2017-18 levels – setting back progress by almost a decade.

Addressing nutrition and food insecurity needs to be a key component

of the nation’s COVID-19 response. The reinstating of the NVAC in October 2020 is a welcomed step that will provide the lifesaving micronutrient to approximately 20 million children all over the country, including half a million in hard-to-reach areas.

The NVAC has adapted to COVID-19 realities and has reinstated the administration of vitamin A to all children 6-59 months old. Health workers involved in this process have been trained in safety protocols developed by the Global Alliance for Vitamin A (GAVA), which is hosted and chaired by Nutrition International. Considering that VAS has shown to contribute to an all-cause

mortality reduction of more than 12% when provided twice yearly to children under five, it is evident that such reliable and safe distribution of vitamin A both during and after this pandemic will have multiple benefits.

Although there is no current evidence on the effectiveness of vitamin A for the treatment of COVID-19 or the reduction in the severity of the specific symptoms it causes, VAS is especially important for vulnerable children in the context of an infectious disease outbreak. Not only does it reduce the incidence of diarrhoea by 15% and the incidence of measles by 50%, but it also contributes to reducing the odds of child stunting, which can have lifelong health benefits.

Vitamin A supplementation remains an essential health and nutrition intervention, and all children aged 6 to 59 months — including those who are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 — should continue to receive vitamin A supplementation.

The frontline of any country’s health system is the immune system of its people, which is fueled by good nutrition. It is crucial to invest in nutrition now so that a generation of children are not robbed of their full potential.

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PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT



Herd immunity approaches to COVID-19 control are a ‘dangerous fallacy’

A group of researchers warn that a so-called herd immunity approach to managing COVID-19 by allowing immunity to develop in low-risk populations while protecting the most vulnerable is “a dangerous fallacy unsupported by the scientific evidence”.

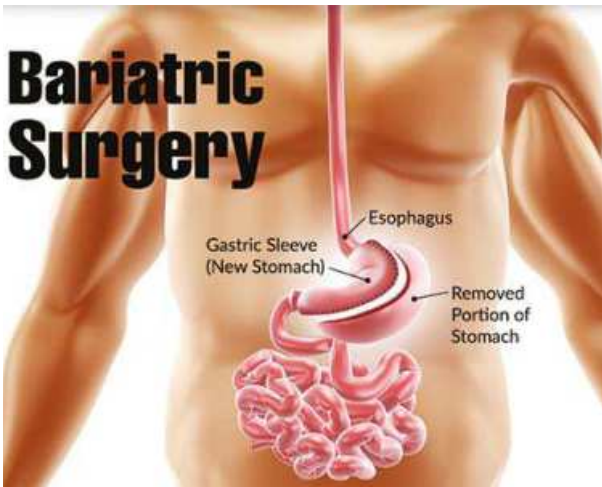
Faced with a second wave of COVID-19, and more than a million recorded deaths worldwide, the authors present their view of the scientific consensus on our understanding of COVID-19, and the strategies that need to be put in place to protect our societies and economies.

The open letter, referred to by its authors as the John Snow Memorandum, is published recently by The Lancet. It is signed by 80 international researchers with expertise spanning public health, epidemiology, medicine, paediatrics, sociology, virology, infectious disease, health systems, psychology, psychiatry, health policy, and mathematical modelling.

They state: “It is critical to act decisively and urgently. Effective measures that suppress and control transmission need to be implemented widely, and they must be supported by financial and social programmes that encourage community responses and address the inequities that have been amplified by the pandemic.”

The letter concludes: “The evidence is very clear: controlling community spread of COVID-19 is the best way to protect our societies and economies until safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics arrive within the coming months. We cannot afford distractions that undermine an effective response; it is essential that we act urgently based on the evidence.”

HEALTH bulletin



Bariatric surgery tied to longer life expectancy among obese

Obese adults who undergo bariatric surgery have longer life expectancy than those who do not have surgery — but their life expectancy still lags behind that of the general population — according to long-term follow-up from an observational study in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Researchers in Sweden followed some 2,000 obese adults who underwent bariatric surgery, 2,000 matched obese controls who did not have surgery, and 1,100 adults from the general population for roughly 20–24 years.

The median life expectancy in the surgery group was 3 years longer than among controls, with surgery patients showing significantly lower cardiovascular and cancer mortality. However, the surgery group’s life expectancy was still 5.5 years shorter than that of the general population.

The researchers note that the higher mortality in the surgery group relative to the general population may be attributable to “the above-normal Body Mass Index (BMI) even after bariatric surgery” and “irreversible effects of obesity-related metabolic dysfunction,” among other factors.

World Hospice and Palliative Care Day 2020

My Care, My Comfort

PROF DR KAZI MANZUR KADER

The incidence of cancer as a non-communicable disease is increasing globally. Bangladesh is no exception to this. The total number of cancer patients in Bangladesh is about 1.5 million.

Cancer is controllable in many cases due to advanced treatment in oncology. The treatment modalities are surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, targeted and biological treatment. It is very important to diagnose cancer in the early stages and start treatment at the right time, which will provide better results.

Cancer is not always detected in the early stage in Bangladesh. As a result, diagnosis is late due to which cancer spreads and causes severe complications that need palliative therapy.

Throughout time, people have suffered life-limiting illnesses but there was not always a system in place to make sure that their last days were comfortable. In the 19th century, the action of hospice care was taken on primarily by women. The attention hospice care would achieve in the next century would be because of these women.

By the 20th century, more hospitals with hospice care were established. ‘The Sisters of Charity’ was an organisation in Ireland that helped the impoverished population of Dublin in the 19th century, and by the 20th century, they had developed other facilities across the globe. This included St. Joseph’s Hospice, which was critical in the history of palliative care.

In 1987, Dr Declan Walsh established the first hospital-based palliative care centre. Today, there are thousands of hospice agencies across the globe and it continues to grow. The first World Hospice and Palliative Care Day was observed in 2005 and it has been going strong ever since. World Hospice and Palliative Care Day takes place on the second Saturday of October. The concept of palliative care is broadly

will have advanced, uncontrolled and terminal stages of the diseases, where adequate symptoms control and comfort in life would be the aims of treatment.

Cancer does not trouble the patient alone, the agony spreads to their relatives and friends too. There is not much awareness amongst the general practitioners and the doctors of other specialties regarding the care of advanced



based on the role of a physician, as stated in a 16th century aphorism - “To cure sometimes, to relieve often, and to comfort always.”

Cancer cure rates with our current practice of multimodality cancer therapy are in a range of 40-50% in most of the developed nations. Thus on a current estimate, approximately 50-70% of patients in developed and developing countries respectively

cancers. Only recently, WHO has taken a firm step in the care of these desperate advanced cancer patients. The National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) of our country has included cancer pain control as one of its agendas.

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New electronic survey manual supports countries to combat micronutrient deficiencies

A new micronutrient survey manual (2020) and toolkit, developed in collaboration by the World Health Organisation (WHO), Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Nutrition International were published recently to meet the demand of countries interested in assessing the micronutrient status of their populations.

Addressing micronutrient malnutrition is one of the greatest global health challenges. Surveys assessing micronutrient status provide a basis for policy makers and programme implementers to understand the magnitude of micronutrient deficiencies and to gather the evidence needed to improve programming.

This user-friendly resource enables programme managers, government officials and researchers alike to access the entire knowledge library of best practices and resources for conducting micronutrient surveys through an interactive website.

Certain population groups, especially women and children, are at greater risk of micronutrient deficiencies. Micronutrients are critical for a well-functioning immune system, which is of utmost importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. If a population has a poor status for key micronutrients, such as vitamin A, zinc or vitamin D, then they may be less well equipped to mount a proper immune response when exposed to viral or bacterial infections than if they had adequate micronutrient status.

/StarHealthBD

What is Osteoporosis ?

- Osteoporosis, or “porous bones”, is a condition that causes bones to gradually thin and weaken, resulting in increase risk of fractures.
- Common bone sites include the spine, hip, and wrist.
- Bone begins to lose calcium faster than they can replace it.
- Less bone remodeling takes place and the bones begin to thin
- Osteoporosis affects one in three women and one in five men over the age of 50.

Prevent/Delay Osteoporosis

- Eat a balanced diet rich in calcium & Vitamin D

Best sources of Vitamin D

- Exposure to sun
- Eggs
- Fish
- Exercise regularly
 - 30 minutes of weight-bearing exercise (walking or jogging) 3-4x a week
 - Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Best dietary sources of calcium

- Dairy products (i.e. milk, cheese, yogurt, cream soups and pudding)
- Green vegetables (i.e. broccoli, spinach & greens)
- Seafood
- Dried peas
- Beans



In Search of Excellence

