

THE THREAT OF COVID-19 ON IRON DEFICIENCY ANAEMIA RATES IN AFRICA, ASIA AND SOUTH AMERICA

Iron deficiency is the leading cause of anaemia worldwide¹. Iron Deficiency Anaemia (IDA) – the type of anaemia caused by iron deficiency – is a huge problem globally, affecting²:

1.62
billion people

24.8%
total population

Worldwide, the highest prevalence is in pre-school aged children where:

47.4%
are anemic³

The Global Burden of Disease project estimates that IDA causes more disability than all other micronutrient deficiencies combined – resulting in 35 million years lived with disability around the world each year⁴



Africa, Asia and South America tend to be the most affected continents with the highest rates of IDA for infants and young children⁵:

THAILAND

Prevalence of IDA in children under-5:

28.3%²

INDONESIA

Prevalence of IDA in children under-5:

36.8%²

AFRICA

Prevalence of IDA in children under-5:

38.0%⁶

INDIA

Prevalence of IDA in children under-5:

57.3%²

MALAYSIA

Prevalence of IDA in children under-5:

38.1%²

ARGENTINA

Prevalence of IDA in children aged 6–23 months:

52.6%⁷

BRAZIL

Prevalence of IDA in children aged 6–30 months:

58.1%⁸

This issue is high on the World Health Organisation (WHO) agenda who are committed to achieving⁹:

50%↓
reduction of anemia in women of reproductive age by 2025

40%↓
reduction in the number of children under-5 who are stunted by 2025

Despite progress made towards meeting this commitment, the current COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to make an already dangerous situation worse as many families struggle to feed their children. This is likely to have a knock-on effect on IDA rates in infants due to¹⁰:

FOOD DISRUPTION AND SHORTAGES



Making it difficult for families and breastfeeding mothers to maintain an adequate, iron-rich diet

INCOME SHOCKS & INCREASES IN THE COST OF NUTRITIOUS FOOD



Families cannot afford to buy nutritious food due to drops in income and increased food prices

DESTITUTION & DISPLACEMENT



Families from urban areas who are fleeing to rural areas at short notice during lockdown are facing extreme difficulty trying to feed their families

Iron is a vital nutrient essential for growth and development and is particularly important in the early years when young children have higher nutrient requirements than adults and are laying down critical brain and neural tissues. Early years infants typically require¹¹:

3x
more iron



IDA can cause health problems for young children, including^{12,13}:

Impaired physical & cognitive development

Poor immune function

Fatigue & lethargy

Increased child mortality

Alleviating the impact of COVID-19 – now and post-pandemic – on child nutrition & IDA rates can be achieved through a combination of practical strategies which support the mother and child, including:

CURRENT STRATEGIES¹⁴⁻¹⁸



Ensuring that pregnant mothers receive their usual ante-natal care including iron and folic acid

Altered eating patterns to increase iron bioavailability and absorption

Supporting all breastfeeding mothers

Consuming foods and milks fortified with iron

POST-PANDEMIC STRATEGIES^{14,19}



Higher accessibility to and increased consumption of iron-rich foods

Enhance the uptake of modern biofortified crops bred for high nutrient content (e.g iron-rich beans and millets)

Promote the better understanding of the importance of nutrient-dense and varied diets – especially for infants and young children

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