

With 80% Indians deficient in Vitamin D, right nutrition is the need of the hour

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Dr Rajan Sankar, Senior Public Health Professional talks about fortification and dietary deficiencies

Nutrition in a balanced form is the key to a healthy status of an individual, as it provides strong immunity which is crucial to protect them from infections and ailments. In these unprecedented times, the ongoing threat from the dangerous virus COVID-19 has made individual immunity a topmost priority for everyone. Consumption of a balanced diet is an important part of good health for everyone, as it affects the way our body works and feels. United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) stresses the role of good nutrition in safeguarding immune health, particularly before, during, and after infections.

Nutrition includes a balanced mix of vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. They are important in maintaining all body functions. Especially Vitamin D which is also known as the 'sunshine vitamin', is a pivotal pillar in supporting the immune health of a human being along with promoting bone and muscle health. Human immune cells have vitamin D receptors that aid this nutrient in performing many essential tasks, both in our inherent and adaptive immune systems. Also, laboratory studies show that vitamin D can reduce cancer cell growth, control infections, and reduce inflammation. Worldwide, 88% of people are found to have suboptimal vitamin D levels whereas 80% of Indians remain deficient which highlights its need for better immunity development. Vitamin D deficiency is the most frequent micronutrient deficiency globally. Vitamin D production in the skin is the primary natural source of vitamin D, but many people have insufficient levels because of limited sun exposure. Only a few food items naturally contain vitamin D, and the best way to get optimum Vitamin D is through fortified food or supplements. The World Health

Organization had called for mandatory micronutrient fortification whenever there is a significant public health need or risk for deficiency in a given population.

The FAO says the most commonly fortified foods constitute cereals/cereal-based products, milk and dairy items, fats and oils, infant formulas, tea, and other beverages. Fortification increases food item's micronutrient levels, replacing those destroyed during processing, thereby preventing or lowering dietary deficiencies. As per a recent study, consuming three to four times the regular daily allowance of this vitamin ensures a more efficient immune system along with a lower risk of upper respiratory conditions. As immunity is critical for consumers during the pandemic, 69% of people are consuming supplements for ensuring robust immunity. Consequently, dietary supplement brands are providing purpose-led nutritional solutions offering effective immune health benefits.

To combat Vitamin D deficiency the fortification and supplementation play a vital role. Vitamin D micronutrient fortification is a sustainable solution for a global public health concern. The implementation of mandatory vitamin D fortification strategies of at least one staple food product, preferably fluid will be crucial in managing vitamin D deficiency which is significant in achieving the theme of a balanced meal.