

■ IODINE DEFICIENCY DISORDER DAY TODAY

Salt iodisation uptake in Pakistan dips to 17%

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Islamabad

As the world observes Iodine Deficiency Disorder Day today (October 23) to celebrate the significant advances made by signing up to the salt iodisation campaign, Pakistan progressively lags behind its South Asian counterparts; salt iodisation uptake in the country has dipped to 17% from a high of 90% in the 1990s. Conversely, it has increased to 78% in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Iodine deficiency is the world's most prevalent yet easily preventable cause of brain damage. This micronutrient deficiency disorder is most commonly seen among poor, pregnant women and preschool children, imposing serious threat to the economy of developing countries.

There is a whole spectrum of health consequences linked to iodine deficiencies; these are birth defects, increased neonatal mortality; brain damage, goiter, thyroid deficiency; impaired physical and mental growth and diminished school performance; and decreased fertility, spontaneous abortions and still births in pregnant women.

Iodine is a mineral element that is required as a trace element in minute quantity by the human body. A spoonful of the substance is all that human beings need in their entire life span. Researchers have documented remarkable improvement in school performance of children with proper iodine intake. Iodine is vital in supporting proper mental development of children. Its deficiency can cause irreversible mental retardation.

Pakistan is rated 6th amongst countries where iodine deficiency is a serious public health problem. Despite efforts over the past several decades, there has been little improvement in the situation. According to the most recent National Nutrition Survey of Pakistan 2001-02, approximately more than 50% of the country's population is at risk of IDD; 22.9% school aged children and 36.5% mothers of children under-5 are severely iodine deficient; and utilisation of iodised salt at the household level is only 17%, which is the lowest in comparison to all countries in the South Asian region.

The 1990 World Summit for Children set the goal of eliminating iodine deficiencies by 2000 and the government of Pakistan undertook to eliminate IDDs by the year 2000. The national goal of Universal Salt Iodization (USI) has been modified to 2010 and elimination of iodine deficiency is to be achieved by 2013.

"Iodine deficiency is so easy to prevent that it is a crime to let even a single child born mentally handicapped for that reason," said Head of Community Medicine at Islamabad Medical & Dental

College Professor Dr. Muhammad Ashraf Chaudhry while talking to 'The News.'

He said that iodine is essential for normal growth, development and well being of all humans. "The whole spectrum of health consequences casually linked to iodine deficiency is collectively known as iodine deficiency disorders (IDDs).

"Iodine deficiency can result in loss of 15 IQ points. The main factor responsible for iodine deficiency is a low dietary supply of iodine," said Dr. Ashraf.

He suggested that the addition of small amount of iodine to table salt in the form of potassium iodate at very little cost can help prevent the incidence of this serious disorder. "Seafood is also a known source of iodine. Other sources of iodine are bread, grains, green vegetables, milk and eggs. Daily requirement of iodine for adults is placed at 150 micrograms per day or 5 gram (1 teaspoonful) of iodised salt per day. The most viable option is having Universal Salt Iodisation (USI) of edible salt across the country," he said.

He said there is a dire need to create mass awareness on this issue and mount advocacy for promotion of IDDs legislation and monitoring the enforcement of Universal Salt Iodisation in order to combat iodine deficiency in the country. "Trainings and capacity building of salt processors at the district level is also required," he said.

Commenting on the problem, Arif Azad, executive coordinator of The Network for Consumer Protection, which has been working on the subject in collaboration with Unicef, and the Nutrition Wing of the Ministry of Health, believes: "A bill to save the people of Pakistan from Iodine Deficiency Disorders through compulsory iodisation of all salt would be a good start for the government to achieve its public health goals."

TheNetwork has developed alliances with the media, civil society, health professionals, large consumers and policy-makers to work for promotion and implementation of USI. Arif Azad further commented that the global observation extends an opportunity to take stock of slippage from health targets on USI campaign.

"It is deeply troubling that we have fallen behind Bangladesh and Nepal. With little investment and strong political will, the government can improve the public health goals of mother and child health by fully signing up to the USI campaign. By promoting awareness and consumer demand for iodized salt, we can prevent a whole generation from falling into diminished mental and physical health. For a prosperous and productive future generation, we need to pledge ourselves to promote a culture of using iodized salt," Azad recommended.

LHC admits AQ Khan's petition

Our correspondent

Rawalpindi

Justice Asad Munir of the Lahore High Court (LHC), Rawalpindi Bench, Thursday admitted a petition of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan for regular hearing from November 11.

Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan had filed an application before the court for early hearing of his case as it involves the question regarding his freedom of movement.

In another case, the LHC bench directed the GHQ judge advocate general (JAG) and the Ministry of Defence to submit their replies in the case of Nadeem Shah, a lawyer, missing since April 13, 2009. He is in the custody of the army and being interrogated, along with a serving lieutenant colonel, under the Secret Act.

Ministry of Defence Director (legal) Lieutenant Colonel Sarfaraz told the court that the meeting between Nadeem Shah and his family members has been arranged. The court, however, sought replies from respondents regarding the question of illegal custody of Nadeem Shah.

Nadeem Shah's family members came to know about his whereabouts when the attorney general of Pakistan told the Supreme Court in May about his arrest by army officials.

The wife of Advocate Nadeem Shah had prayed to the court to ask the GHQ and DAG to inform about the present status of Nadeem and explain the legality of his detention.

Making the Ministry of Defence secretary and the GHQ judge advocate general as respondents, the petitioner, through her lawyer Shaikat Aziz Siddiqui, maintained that her husband went missing on April 13 and the attorney general of Pakistan submitted before the Supreme Court that he was in the custody of army and being interrogated under the Secret Act.

She had prayed to the court to get her husband released from the illegal custody and if there was any charge against him he should be tried accordingly.