

Half our kids lack vitamin A

KATHARINE CHILD

ALMOST half of preschool children in South Africa have a vitamin A deficiency that puts them at risk of illness and stunted growth.

The low levels of vitamin A were found in a recent Human Sciences Research Council health study in which researchers took blood samples from children aged two to five nationwide.

Professor Ali Dhansey, of the Medical Research Council, said the fact that 43% of children were vitamin A-deficient was a "huge" public health problem.

The World Health Organisation considers a country in which more than 20% of children are vitamin A-deficient to have a "severe" health problem.

Lack of vitamin A weakens the immune system, putting children at risk of frequent "diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory infections", said Dhansey.

They are also more likely to be stunted: 26% of children aged between one and three are below

average height for their age, and 9.5% are severely retarded in their growth.

Dietician Ina Nortjé said children who were vitamin A-deficient developed mouth ulcers, poor night vision, dry flaky skin, dandruff, and frequently contracted colds and

other infections.

She said vitamin A and other vitamins were removed from processed foods because they reduced the products' shelf life.

By law, vitamins and iron have to be added to maize.

But a public health specialist at

the Centre for Disease Control, Jacqueline Pienaar, said rural people were so poor that they could not buy fortified maize but instead were forced to eat home-grown produce.

Though the figures for vitamin A deficiency in preschool children

have improved since 2005, when they were at 63%, Basil Kransdorff, a Johannesburg industrial chemist, said the government's 12-year-old policy of mandatory food fortification was not working.

"If it were we wouldn't see these high levels of deficiency and anaemia."

He said vitamin A in maize was destroyed by cooking.

Kransdorff invented e-Pap, a cheap, fortified maize containing easily digestible minerals. More than two million people across Africa eat this cereal.

NGOs that use it say it benefits children and that they exhibit improved resistance to infection.

Dhansey said breast-feeding would counter vitamin deficiency.

"Breast-feeding of infants and young children, and the consumption of fortified maize by both women and children, can help."

Only 8% of children in South Africa are exclusively breast-fed until the age of six months, which is one of the lowest rates in the world.

TUCK SHOPS NOT DOING RIGHT BY OUR CHILDREN

ONLY a third of the tuck shops at private schools in Johannesburg sold fresh fruit, according to a recent survey.

Nestlé conducted the survey in June at 20 primary schools in the metro and found:

- Fizzy cold drinks and crisps were the most often bought;
- Other best-sellers, in order of popularity, were toasted sandwiches, garlic bread, hot chocolate, sweets, hot dogs, frozen yoghurt, ice cream, cooked meals and pies;
- About 30% of tuck shop owners

said children ate "far too much junk food"; and

- Only 28% of tuck shops sold fresh milk.

Some tuck shops were allowed to sell junk food only after school hours and had to provide "healthy food" at break times.

The shop owners said that eating healthily started at home.

Nearly every mother surveyed said she provided her children with a balanced diet and healthy meals.

But only 7% of the 652 moms interviewed said they wanted to

be told about healthier options that tuck shops could stock, such as fruit, biltong and cheese.

A quarter of mothers wanted tuck shops to sell hot chips.

Naazneen Khan, a Nestlé health manager, said: "The results revealed that most children are consuming fizzy, fattening, fun and frivolous food at school — not good news when you consider that they spend a big portion of their day there and that nutrient deficiencies can lead to health problems later in life." — Katharine Child