

Thursday 9 January 2020

## Adequate iron intake: a key nutrient to Closing the Gap

[New research released today](#), highlights the importance of adequate iron in supporting early childhood development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Published in the Dietitians Association of Australia's journal, *Nutrition & Dietetics*<sup>1</sup>, early childhood anaemia (during six to 23 months of age) was found to more than double the risk of developmental vulnerability among these children in their first year of full-time school.

While the cause of early childhood anaemia is unknown, iron deficiency is suggested as the most likely reason. Iron is a vital nutrient for healthy development in the first few years of life.

Accredited Practising Dietitian, Dympna Leonard and her research team, used the Australian Early Development Census and health records to compare developmental indicators in 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in Far North Queensland.

“This is the first study of its kind in Australia. As more than 60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were found to experience anaemia between the ages of six to 23 months, this adds further emphasis to the need to prioritise childhood nutrition and anaemia prevention” said Ms Leonard.

Good nutrition throughout the first 1000 days of life, is important to support growth and set a strong foundation for childhood development.

“Supporting mothers with breastfeeding and encouraging nutrient rich diets for both the child and mother is important to assist early development. Many traditional foods are nutrient rich, and these are encouraged to be included within the diet, if available,” said Ms Leonard.

When prevalence of early childhood anaemia exceeds 20%, the World Health Organisation recommends specific anaemia prevention programs that combine nutrition promotion with food-fortification. These programs have been shown to be effective in preventing both early childhood anaemia and the developmental disadvantage associated with anaemia.

“Enriching foods with added nutrients is a way to deliver a rapid, positive impact, while also encouraging the consumption of nutritious foods. These types of programs have been piloted in a small number of remote communities in Australia, providing much needed insight into considerations for a larger scale program<sup>2</sup>.”

Addressing food and nutrition issues and preventing anaemia is vital to ensure all remote community children have the best start in life.

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**For further information or to organise an interview with Dympna Leonard APD,  
contact Pattie King, Dietitians Association of Australia on 0409 661 920**

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<sup>1</sup>Leonard D et al. Early Childhood anaemia more than doubles the risk of developmental vulnerability at school-age among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of remote Far North Queensland: Findings of a retrospective cohort study. *Nutrition & Dietetics*. 2020; 1– 12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1747-0080.12602>

<sup>2</sup>Aquino D et al. Early Childhood Nutrition and Anaemia Prevention Project: Summary Report. Darwin: The Fred Hollows Foundation, Indigenous Australia Program 2013.

## **Nutrition & Dietetics Journal**

[Nutrition & Dietetics](#) is the scientific journal of the Dietitians Association of Australia. It is Australia's leading peer-reviewed journal in its field and is published five times a year (February, April, July, September and November) by Wiley. For information on subscribing to *Nutrition & Dietetics*, including receiving new content alerts, visit the [Wiley Online Library](#)