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SNAPSHOT

Study Identifies Preventable Cause of Childhood Anemia

USAID-ACCESO partners with Honduran scientists to study and treat the link between parasites and anemia in children under 2.



Photo by Fintrac Inc.

Project specialists and health volunteers conduct on-site visits to dispense medication, lead trainings, and monitor children's height and weight development. Ensuring proper feeding and hygiene practices is critical in decreasing the prevalence of anemia among children under 2 years old.

Iron is an essential nutrient for children's growth and development as it helps move oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. Children with long-term iron deficiency can develop anemia, which, when untreated, can cause delays in physical and mental development.

Baseline data collected in 2012 in the six departments where USAID-ACCESO works showed that 35 percent of children under 2 were anemic. Additional sample surveys conducted by the project found even higher rates of anemia among young children despite a steady supply of iron supplements in the children's diets.

Recognizing this critical problem, USAID-ACCESO worked with local, regional, and national Ministry of Health staff to better understand the causes and appropriate preventative measures for the high prevalence of anemia.

Over the course of several months in late 2014, project health and nutrition specialists conducted household visits to observe feeding and hygiene behaviors. The specialists discovered that while mothers and caregivers were adhering to the healthy feeding practices they learned from project trainings, uptake of good hygiene practices was limited in many households.

After a thorough analysis of the overall living conditions of families, health specialists, project leadership, and Ministry of Health officials determined that many cases of anemia can be caused by parasites rather than by a consistent lack of iron in children's diets. ACCESO staff then met with the Ministry of Health and microbiologists from the National University of Honduras (UNAH) to develop a two-phase intervention plan.

The first phase was an intensive field study conducted in January 2015 by a team of microbiologists from UNAH to determine the level of parasitism in children under 2 years old. More than 50 percent of children tested positive for one or more types of parasites, and 30 percent of children with parasites also tested positive for anemia. The treatment phase began in February 2015, and each child that tested positive for parasites received medical attention.

Project staff continue to work closely with public and private health service providers to identify and address other factors that can contribute to the increased prevalence of childhood anemia.

USAID-ACCESO now incorporates the following key messages in all training activities: washing children's hands and toys frequently; ensuring children always wear shoes when playing in dirt; avoiding coffee consumption among young children; and promoting breastfeeding in lieu of cow's milk.

This study is the first of its kind in Honduras and new projects are already incorporating its findings and recommendations into activity implementation. Results of the study are currently in discussion with Ministry of Health officials, policy makers, and the donor community to encourage them to support additional research and, ultimately, revise health care standards to address the problem of parasitism among young children.