



Department of Health and Social Services

Adam Crum, MSPH, Commissioner
Anne Zink, MD, Chief Medical Officer

3601 C Street, Suite 540
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi>

Division of Public Health

Heidi Hedberg, Director

Local (907) 269-8000

24 Hour Emergency (800) 478-0084

Editors:

Joe McLaughlin, MD, MPH
Louisa Castrodale, DVM, MPH

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Update on Prevention of Rickets in Alaska Children

Background

During 1999–2013, rickets was more common among Alaska Native children than among children in the general US population.¹ One possible reason for this disparity was declining maternal dietary intake of vitamin D-containing foods like salmon.² In 2016, the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) started routine prenatal vitamin D supplementation of pregnant women with 1,000 IU of vitamin D in addition to routine prenatal vitamins. In 2018, the Alaska Vitamin D Workgroup published Alaska-specific recommendations for vitamin D supplementation in infants and pregnant women (Table).³ This *Bulletin* presents findings from a study evaluating the impact of routine YKHC prenatal vitamin D supplementation on 25(OH)D concentrations, a survey of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding supplementation, and an update on rickets cases in Alaska Native children.

Table. Alaska Vitamin D Workgroup Recommendations for Vitamin D Intake and Supplementation³

Population		Dietary Intake/Supplementation	Screening
Infants (0–12 months)	Exclusively or partially breast-fed	Supplement with 800 IU/day D-Drops	Not routinely recommended
	Exclusively formula-fed	Supplement with 400 IU/day D-Drops in addition to 400 IU/Liter in formula	
Pregnant Women		Supplement with 1,000 IU/day in addition to daily prenatal vitamin containing 400 IU/day (not to exceed 4,000 IU/day)	Not routinely recommended
Children		Follow National Academy of Medicine ⁵ diet/supplementation intake recommendation of 600 IU/day	Not routinely recommended

Methods

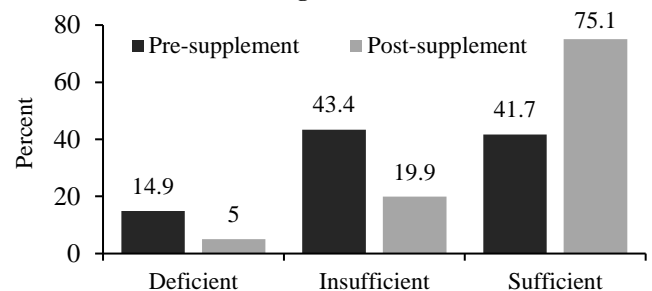
We compared 25-hydroxyvitamin D (25(OH)D) concentrations in Yukon Kuskokwim (YK) Delta prenatal women from 2015–2016 (pre-supplementation) with those from 2017–2019 (post-supplementation). YKHC conducted a web-based survey to evaluate knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about vitamin D supplementation among YK Delta residents. We also reviewed the incidence of childhood rickets (ICD9, ICD10) diagnosed in Alaska Native children aged <10 years at the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) during 2001–2021.

Results

Of the 1,522 prenatal women in the study, 175 (11.5%) were from the pre-supplementation period and 1,347 (88.5%) were from the post-supplementation period. All were evaluated during late pregnancy (>20 weeks gestation). The mean 25(OH)D concentrations increased by 36.5% (from 20.0 ng/ml pre-supplementation to 27.3 ng/ml post-supplementation; $p < 0.0001$) during the study period. The proportion of women with deficient (<12 ng/ml) and insufficient (12 ng/ml–<20 ng/ml) 25(OH)D concentrations decreased by 66.4% and 54.1%, respectively ($p < 0.0001$; Figure).

The late pregnancy mean 25(OH)D level was 35.9 ng/mL for women with >120 days of vitamin D refills versus 25.4 ng/mL for women with 0 days of refills (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Chi-Square 69.16, DF 4, $p < 0.0001$).

Figure. Vitamin D Status Pre-Supplementation (2015–2016) and Post-Supplementation (2017–2019) among Prenatal Women in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Region



Overall, 95 YK Delta residents completed surveys, including 36 (34%) pregnant women, 27 (28%) YKHC employees, 17 (18%) mothers, and 25 (27%) health care providers (more than one response possible). Most respondents (86, 91%) said it was important for pregnant women to take daily vitamin D supplements. Sixty-one (64%) stated that they already knew about prenatal and infant supplementation recommendations. Of these, 31 (51%) had heard from their prenatal provider, 22 (36%) had heard from another provider, and <10% each reported hearing from another source (e.g., pharmacy, WIC flyer). Of the 36 pregnant women who completed the survey, 33 (92%) reported taking daily/near daily vitamin D supplements. Of 32 parents of infants completing the survey, 13 (41%) reported giving their infant daily or near daily vitamin D drops. The incidence of childhood rickets diagnosed in AN children aged <10 years at ANMC decreased 49% from 4.88 cases per 100,000 children during 2001–2016 to 2.51 cases per 100,000 children during 2017–2020.

Discussion

During the study period, 25(OH)D levels increased by 36.5% among prenatal women in the YK Delta after initiation of routine prenatal supplementation with 1,000 IU of vitamin D in addition to routine prenatal vitamins. Moreover, the proportion of prenatal women with deficient 25(OH)D levels decreased by 66.4%. Receiving >120 days of refills (vs. no refills) was also associated with higher vitamin D levels in this population of prenatal women. Awareness of the importance of vitamin D supplementation among pregnant women and infants was high among survey respondents. However, while 92% of pregnant women who responded reported routinely taking vitamin D supplements, only 41% of mothers reported routinely giving their infant vitamin D drops. Finally, the incidence of childhood rickets diagnosed at ANMC appears to be decreasing.

The results of this report provide additional evidence in support of the Alaska Vitamin D Workgroup Recommendations for vitamin D intake and supplementation (Table).³ Clinicians should educate prenatal women and parents about these recommendations in conjunction with promoting healthy dietary sources of vitamin D.³

References

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