29th JULY 2018

THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
Micronutrients and Health

'MICRONUTRIENTS AND HEALTH' APPG MEETING
EXPLORES THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVING IRON STATUS IN YOUNG WOMEN

The latest meeting of the 'Micronutrients and Health' All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), the Secretariat for which is managed by the Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA), was held on Monday 15th July in House of Commons Committee Room 18, and explored the importance of improving iron status in young women. Attendees discussed current evidence that over 50% of teenage girls and over 25% of adult women have low iron-intakes (i.e. below the lower reference nutrient intake which is only sufficient for 2.5% of these groups), and that 9% of teenage girls and 5% of adult women show evidence of iron-deficiency anaemia.

(L-R: Marcus Jones MP, Dr Sebastien Farnaud, Charlotte Stirling-Reed, Baroness Masham of Ilton, HFMA Chair Robert Taylor)

Chairing the meeting was **Marcus Jones MP**, who reminded the group that the last APPG meeting had focused on the important role of folic acid supplementation before and during pregnancy. Since then the Government had announced its consultation on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid, and the APPG Secretariat would be responding to that consultation.

The meeting's first speaker was **Charlotte Stirling-Reed**, a Consultant Nutritionist specialising in maternal, infant and child nutrition, and registered with the Association for Nutrition, the Nutrition Society, SENSE Nutritionists and the Guild of Health Writers. Charlotte gave an overview on the different forms of iron in foods and its uses within the body, noting that many factors – from age to diet and general health – can affect iron requirement considerably. For example, different foods can be enhancers or inhibitors of iron absorption.

Charlotte stressed that iron requirements for adolescent girls are largely driven by the pubertal growth spurt and increased blood volume, haemoglobin and lean tissue synthesis, as well as losses due to menstruation. Currently NHS guidelines state that women or girls with heavy periods are at higher risk of iron deficiency anaemia, and may need to take iron supplements.

Charlotte explained that pregnancy is also associated with increased iron demand, with an increased risk of iron deficiency anaemia. She noted that the significant rise in vegan and vegetarian diets in all life

stages presented an increased risk of iron deficiency and recommended that health professionals should be alert and educated on this issue. Charlotte concluded: "*Those with signs and symptoms suggestive of iron deficiency anaemia should receive appropriate clinical assessment and advice, including dietary advice on how to increase their iron intakes and to consider use of iron supplements if required.*"

The second speaker was **Dr Sebastien Farnaud**, Associate Professor of Biomedical Sciences at Coventry University. He has held numerous research-led roles at the Dr Hadwen Trust, University of Westminster, University of Bedfordshire and Coventry University. Dr Farnaud began by stating that iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency and although iron is essential for human life, it can also be toxic. He explained that though iron is very difficult to absorb it can be recycled by the body.

Sebastien's presentation centred on the question of whether it is a more effective strategy to target the cause or effect of iron deficiency, and considered the pros and cons of available treatment options: oral iron, IV iron, and transfusions. He explained that an iron supplement which is highly absorbed by the host would be a good solution and noted that encapsulation could improve uptake efficiency and therefore reduce gastrointestinal side effects arising from unabsorbed iron. IV iron and transfusion can be envisaged for iron deficiency anaemia, but are not a quick fix as they unfortunately come with health risks. He concluded that "*identifying the cause of iron deficiency will dictate the therapeutic approach.*"

Discussion also focused on the high doses of prescribed iron, far higher than those in food supplements, though it is well established that such levels are not well absorbed and are associated with gastrointestinal side effects.

Summarising the meeting, the Chair Marcus Jones concluded that "*there is little doubt that the overall iron status of young women in general is not particularly encouraging. Avoiding iron deficiency in the first place should be the aim*". He suggested a couple of key action steps that might result from the discussions. Firstly, he emphasised the need to raise awareness early in schools about the key sources of iron in the diet including from meat, and which vegetables and vegetarian foods are good sources of non-haem iron. Secondly, he suggested more work should be done with UK health officials to raise awareness among health professionals of the poor iron intakes and iron status in many young women, particularly in view of the growing trend towards vegan and vegetarian diets. He asked the APPG's Secretariat to take these action steps forward.

For more information on the All Party Parliamentary Group for Micronutrients and Health, please contact appg@hfma.co.uk, or visit micronutrientsappg.org

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