

# Media Update

1 March 2018

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## UNICEF

Joint Press Release

### Nearly 19 million newborns at risk of brain damage every year due to iodine deficiency

*UNICEF and GAIN urge immediate action to increase access to iodized salt amid longstanding evidence on how deficiency reduces cognitive ability*

NEW YORK, 1 March 2018 – Nearly 19 million babies born globally every year – 14 per cent – are at risk of permanent yet preventable brain damage and reduced cognitive function due to a lack of iodine in the earliest years of life, according to a new joint report by UNICEF and GAIN released today. More than 1 in 4 of these children – 4.3 million – lives in South Asia.

#### Brighter futures: Protecting early brain development through salt

iodization notes that iodine deficiency is a leading cause of preventable brain damage worldwide. Insufficient iodine during pregnancy and infancy results in neurological and psychological deficits, reducing a child's IQ by 8 to 10 points. This translates into major losses in the cognitive capital of entire nations and thus their socio-economic development.

“The nutrients a child receives in the earliest years of life influence their brain development for life, and can make or break their chance of a prosperous future,” said UNICEF Senior Nutrition Adviser Roland Kupka. “By protecting and supporting children's development in early life, we are able to achieve immense results for children throughout their lifespan.”



Salt iodization is both cost effective and economically beneficial at only US \$0.02–0.05 per child annually. Every dollar spent on salt iodization is estimated to return US \$30 through increased future cognitive ability.

While South Asia is home to the largest proportion of babies at risk globally, the region has the second highest iodized salt coverage rate at 87 per cent of the population, preceded by East Asia and the Pacific at 91 per cent coverage. The lowest coverage with iodized salt was seen in Eastern and Southern Africa, where around 25 per cent of the population do not have access to iodized salt, leaving 3.9 million babies every year unprotected against iodine deficiency disorders.

“Iodine is critical for childhood development,” said Greg S. Garrett, Director of Food Policy at GAIN. “Due to the collective efforts of governments, industry, civil society, UNICEF, GAIN and others, we are on the verge of being able to ensure sustainable iodine intakes for all children. But there is still much more to be done to end iodine deficiency and we hope others join our efforts to further scale up salt iodization in the hardest to reach areas.”

The earliest moments of life, from conception up to age 2, are the most critical for a child’s development. Nutrition – along with protection and stimulating activities like play and early learning – during a child’s first 1,000 days shape brain development for life.

The report outlines urgent steps to reduce the risk of mental impairment to babies’ growing brains:

- Integrate salt iodization into national plans to support children’s nutrition and brain development in early childhood;
- Align salt iodization and salt reduction agendas;
- Establish surveillance systems to identify unreached populations;
- Strengthen regulatory systems to enforce existing legislation on salt iodization;
- Recognize the growing importance of fortified foods as potential sources of iodized salt.

UNICEF and GAIN have been working together for the past 10 years to tackle iodine deficiency disorders:

- In Europe and Central Asia, the salt industry has made iodization part of good manufacturing practices;

- In East Asia and the Pacific, strong policies and legislation helped establish iodized salt as the norm for households and industry;
- In Eastern and Southern Africa, regional commissions have championed salt iodization in the context of a broader nutrition agenda;
- In South Asia, salt iodization has successfully improved population iodine status and a major focus is now to achieve universal coverage and achieve programme sustainability;
- In West and Central Africa, changing trade patterns have affected the salt industry, but there has been remarkable cooperation in harmonizing standards, including those for iodized salt.

## Notes to Editors

For additional information, read the report [here](#).

### About GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition is an independent non-profit foundation based in Geneva, Switzerland. GAIN was developed at the UN 2002 Special Session of the General Assembly on Children. For more information about GAIN's work, visit [www.gainhealth.org](http://www.gainhealth.org).

### About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone. For more information about UNICEF and its work for children visit [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).

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