

- Children—nutrition

Iron deficiency impacts kids' learning

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IRON deficiency in children can have a significant and irreversible effect on brain development and impacts learning ability as they grow.



Iron deficiency anaemia or IDA in young children can impact brain development. PICTURE CREDIT: FREEPIK

Iron deficiency anaemia or IDA is a common problem among young children as their diets may lack iron-rich foods.

In Malaysia, one in three children is at risk of anaemia, according to the 2023 Iron Strong Study.

Iron deficiency anaemia in children is often underdiagnosed because mild cases often show no visible symptoms, says Professor Dr Muhammad Yazid Jalaludin, senior consultant paediatric endocrinologist at the faculty of medicine, Universiti Malaya.

However, this undetected deficiency can significantly impact growth and has irreversible consequences on a child's brain development and learning abilities.

“Almost 90 per cent of cases are asymptomatic, so waiting for symptoms to appear before screening will result in a huge group of affected children being left out.”

There's a need for early detection to address the condition, adds Dr Yazid.

Non-invasive, pain-free screening methods are now available that produce quick results at a lower cost. “Don't wait until symptoms appear before taking your child for screening because the brain can be impacted.”

Despite the alarming prevalence of IDA among Malaysian children, national policy regarding routine screening and intervention remains inadequate.

However, screening is just one part of the strategy. A holistic approach to combating IDA in children is crucial.

Professor Dr Hamid Jan from the nutrition programme, school of health sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, says addressing IDA in children requires a

multifaceted approach that combines early detection with comprehensive nutritional interventions.

Incorporating a variety of iron-rich foods into children's diets is crucial, he says, adding that these include lean meats, poultry, beans or dark leafy vegetables like spinach.

Additionally, fortified milk and foods play an important role in ensuring adequate iron intake, especially for children who may have limited access to diverse diets.

"Pairing iron-rich foods with enhancers like vitamin C-rich foods can significantly improve absorption,

making it easier for your child to benefit from their iron intake."

Children who are picky or fussy eaters are at higher risk for IDA as their diets are imbalanced or inadequate.

Unfortunately, many parents tend to be in denial about the possibility of their child having IDA as the child may appear normal.

Screening remains the most effective and accurate method of determining IDA in children and subsequently putting into place steps to address the condition.

As we continue to uncover the significant prevalence of anaemia among Malaysian children, it becomes increasingly clear that early detection and intervention are crucial, says Dr Yazid.

By addressing the risk factors early, particularly through nutritional education and routine screenings, we can mitigate the long-term impacts of anaemia on children's growth and brain development.