

'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. Attendees came together to explore the importance of improving iron status in young women, and discussed current evidence that shows that a high proportion of teenage girls and young adult women have low iron-intakes, with many showing evidence of iron-deficiency anaemia and low iron stores.



(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**, and he reminded the group that the last APPG meeting had focused on the vital role of nutrition before and during pregnancy, and the important role of folic acid supplementation. Since that meeting the Government had announced its consultation on the introduction of 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. She is registered with the Association for Nutrition, the Nutrition Society, SENSE Nutritionists and the Guild of Health Writers and, in her presentation, Charlotte gave an overview on iron forms and its uses within the body, noting that many factors - from age to diet and general health - can affect iron requirement considerably, and some foods can be enhancers or inhibitors.

In particular, she 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 only women or girls with heavy period are at a high risk of iron deficiency anaemia, and therefore may need to take iron supplements.

Pregnancy is also associated with increased iron demand, Charlotte explained, and therefore there is 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 to recognise the increased risk of iron deficiency anaemia in these cases. Concluding her presentation, Charlotte argued: *“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 next 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 it is essential for human life, it can also be toxic. He explained that iron is very difficult to absorb but the body will recycle iron when possible.

His presentation centred on the question of whether it is more effective strategy to target the cause or effect of iron deficiency and looked at 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 and not an infectious agent would be a good solution for the poor absorption issue. He noted that the encapsulated formulation could improve uptake efficiency and therefore reduces side effects. In iron deficiency anaemia, he said that IV and transfusion can be envisaged but would not be a quick fix as they unfortunately also come with a lot of health risks. To conclude he remarked that *“identifying the cause of iron deficiency will dictate the therapeutic approach.”*

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 best to provide non-haem iron sources. Secondly, he suggested more work should be done with UK health officials to raise awareness amongst health professionals of the poor iron intakes and iron status in many young women, particularly due to the growing trend towards these vegan and vegetarian diets, and 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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