

Combating malnutrition to prevent stunting

The number of children with stunted growth remains high and therefore continuous efforts must be made to educate pregnant women and women with young children with regard to nutritional requirements.

Alip (not his real name) is 1-year-old this month but he has yet to start crawling, let alone walking. Normally, babies at his age have started walking — an average developmental milestone that they achieve.

The physical activity that Alip has achieved, to date, is to lay flat on his stomach while raising his head.

The short, thin, pale-looking baby is not responsive to waving, blowing kisses or other such gestures. With his blank stare, he has a habit of sticking out his tongue, a clear sign distinguishing him from other normal babies.

“Unlike his brother and sisters, he has a delayed growth,” said the 42-year old Uti (not her real name) in a sad tone while caressing his son’s head, at her brother’s house in Senden Village, Sukorejo, Magelang, Central Java.

She acknowledged that financial constraint has prevented her from consuming the required nutrition-rich foods and having regular health-checkups during her pregnancy, leaving her with a baby born abnormally.

Aware of the delayed growth suffered by her child, Uti, who breastfeeds her baby, said that she pledged to pay more attention to her baby by having proper

nutrition-rich intake that will, hopefully, continually improve the health condition of her baby.

“I will also visit Posyandu [an integrated health service post], which I rarely did during my pregnancy, to monitor the developmental growth of my baby,” she said.

When it comes to having a baby suffering from stunted growth, Uti is not alone in Indonesia. Many other mothers across the country also have children who suffer from stunted growth due to malnutrition.

According to the World Bank, the number of stunted children under the age of five has reached 8.4 million or about 37.2 percent of Indonesian children. The World Bank suggests that they suffer from chronic malnutrition.

The report also states that 4.4 percent or 19.6 percent of Indonesian children are underweight as a result of malnutrition.

Good nutrition is the basic foundation for sustainable development, it reads.

The double burden of malnutrition, as referred to in the report, is that chronic malnutrition carries a two-fold burden. First, it reduces people’s productivity and second, it increases the risk of

non-communicable diseases such as heart disease and diabetes when older.

“Alarmingly, World Bank research indicates that incidences of stunting grew from 35.6 to 37.2 percent in the period between 2010 and 2013. Rising malnutrition implies that Indonesian society is becoming less equal,” the report states.

Research shows that brain (cognitive) development is curtailed by chronic malnutrition and this affects children’s performance at school by reducing IQ scores by five to 11 points.

Later on in life, when children become adults, reduced cognitive skills translate into lower earnings.

“The impact of this is not only felt by the individual but also by the economy”.

The issue of malnutrition starts during pregnancy when the unborn baby’s body becomes “pre-programmed” to cope with a minimal intake of nutrition.

Dr. Elvina Karyadi, Country Director of Micronutrient Initiative (MI) Indonesia, said that the nation has been included as one of the 17 countries of the 117 countries with health problems including stunting, wasting and obesity. “Less than half of the children under five grow well,” she said quoting the Global

Nutrition Report 2015.

She also unveiled that one in four pregnant women suffer from anemia and one in three children suffer from stunting.

The child mortality rate is 40 per 1,000 new born — nearly half of this child mortality is caused by a lack of nutrition, she said.

When pregnant, mothers and their family commonly pay more attention to health, including food intake, because “this will have an impact on the health of the mother and baby. However, there are several problems facing them when fulfilling the need for nutrition,” said Mardewi, Program Coordinator, Maternal and Child Health, Indonesia Micronutrient Initiative.

“In the first trimester of the pregnancy, mothers will often get nausea, causing them to have less food intake and thus they have less nutrition too,” she said.

She said that a habit of eating fast foods that lack micronutrients also poses a problem. “Additionally, when pregnant, women need more micronutrient supplements compared to when they are not pregnant,” she said.

Food industry

Therefore, the government, through the Health Ministry, runs an extra iron supplement (TTD) program under which “pregnant women are given extra supplements or a tablet that contains 60 mg of iron and 400 micro grams of folic acid aimed to prevent and cope with anemia”, Mardewi said.

“Anemia during pregnancy has a risk of affecting the growth of the fetus, which will lead to low birth weight, bleeding when giving birth and can also cause maternal and infant mortality,” Elvina said.

The rapid growth of the food industry, whose products are regularly found in the form of packaged snacks and beverages in supermarkets whose number has also mushroomed in urban areas, has led to pregnant women having more choice in food intake.

“There is no other food that contains complete nutrition, other than breast feeding (ASD),” said Elvina.

Therefore, it is necessary to see the nutrition content in the foods



Getting weighed matters: A child is being weighed at a Posyandu, an integrated health service post, in Baliase village, Marawola district, Sigi, Central Sulawesi. Getting a child weighed and measured is a useful way of checking that he or she is growing as expected.

available in the market. “The rapid growth of the food industry has led to the reduction of fresh food. Fast foods contain high carbohydrate and fat content and lack the vitamins and minerals that the body needs,” she said.

With many women seemingly reluctant to take iron tablets on a regular basis during pregnancy and breast feeding, breakthrough efforts are proposed by those concerned with mother and child health.

A. Heru Nugroho, head of the Nutrition Division at Provincial Health Office of East Java, for example, suggested that it is important to build an image that an iron tablet is a health medicine, meaning that those pregnant women who consume it will be able to deliver their baby safely and smoothly.

Trained health volunteers at Puskesmas play a vital role in this regard. “They can team up with volunteers at Posyandu, whom directly interact with pregnant women and mothers with young children, to continuously educate them on the issue,” he said.

Dr. Elvina underscored the importance of education surrounding nutrition for pregnant women to allow them to choose foods that contain micronutrients to be processed and then to be consumed. “Education on nutrition also covers the benefit of

micronutrients and sources of foods that contain the micronutrients,” she said.

Local wisdom

Indonesia is a large country and comprises many islands. Thus, it is also varied in terms of ethnic groups, culture, education levels, economic and geographical conditions.

The question of how nutrition-improvement programs can effectively reach the target audience is a challenge for health officials and cadres.

Several health officials have provided answers to the perceived challenges. According to A. Heru Nugroho, trained health cadres and volunteers at respective Puskesmas and Posyandu in East Java use local wisdom when educating pregnant women and younger children in the respective communities with regard to nutrition.

For communities close to Central Javanese culture, locally known as Mataraman, “Health cadres make an approach to the leaders or bureaucracy, such as district or village heads, because the community believes that leaders serve as a model” he added.

“In Madura, where locals believe in what Kyai [religious teachers] say, we closely collaborate with Kyai,” he said. **(Sudibyo M. Wiradji)**

Ensuring pregnant women, children are well nourished

The Micronutrient Initiative, the Ministry of Health (MoH) and Governments of Australia and Canada have joined forces to tackle micronutrient deficiencies facing pregnant women and children under five in East Java and East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) amid an ever-changing environment.

Witnessing pregnant women taking iron tablets and young children drinking mineral supplements will surely please those concerned about women’s and children’s health. Sufficient nutrition is of particular benefit to women, infants and young children.

But the reality has yet to reflect expectations.

Health officials and trained volunteers at a community health center (Puskesmas) and an integrated health service post (Posyandu), acknowledged the challenges facing them in persuading pregnant women and children under five to take the vitamins and minerals that their bodies need.

“Iron tablets are available for free for pregnant women. It turns out, however, that asking them to take them is not that easy,” said A. Heru Nugroho, head of the Nutrition Division at Provincial Health Office of East Java in Surabaya following the recent launch of the Integrated Program of Micronutrient Supplementation for Reducing Mortality and Morbidity in Indonesia (MITRA).

Tastelessness and lack of awareness of its benefits are the reason behind their reluctance to take the tablets, he added.

“Many pregnant women prefer consuming *jamu* [herbal medicine] which tastes better than an iron tablet,” he said.

A similar micronutrient-taking reluctance-related challenge is also facing Puskesmas staff in NTT. “Once our staff at Puskesmas gave Oralit [oral rehydration therapy] and zinc tablets to diarrhea-infected children, but the tablets remained untouched because they did not like them,” said Joyce Tibuludji, head of the disease elimination and prevention division at the NTT Provincial Health Office. “Many parents still underestimate diarrhea.”

Trained volunteers at the

Posyandu in Kuanheum village, about half an hour from Kupang, NTT, also share the same challenges, especially in regard to inviting pregnant women or mothers with newborns to visit a nearby health post where they are supposed to receive iron tablets, Vitamin A, zinc and other vitamins and minerals.

“We need extra efforts to persuade pregnant women to visit the Posyandu and take iron tablets,” said trained volunteer Yosintip, 33.

Micronutrients, including iron, are vital for pregnant women and children under five, especially in the first 1,000 days of a child’s life. “Iron-deficiency anemia during pregnancy is associated with preterm delivery, low birth weight and infant mortality,” said an expert.

A lack of these important vitamins and minerals puts children at increased risk of illness, which unless tackled properly, will affect their development and growth.

Many pregnant women lack awareness about the importance of consuming such micronutrients, which partly contributes to the increased rate of stunting among children.

The World Bank said in its latest report that 37.2 percent of Indonesian children under the age of five — 8.4 million children — were stunted (meaning excessively small for their age) and suffered from chronic malnutrition.

“As such, Indonesia has the fifth-highest level of stunting in the world,” it said.

The report also stated that 19.6 percent of Indonesian children under five years old (approximately 4.4 million) were underweight as a result of malnutrition.

This explains why the Canada-based Micronutrient Initiative (MI) and the governments of Indonesia, Australia and Canada launched recently a new nutrition program, called MITRA dedicated to improving the health and productivity of pregnant women and children below the age of five in

East Java and NTT provinces under the MITRA initiative.

The expected three-year program that targets 20 districts in the respective provinces will ensure that pregnant women and young children get the right start in life, paving the way for a new generation of healthy and productive Indonesians, which ultimately will contribute to building a stronger and more resilient society.

Under the program, MI is collaborating with the MoH to increase healthcare workers’ capacity to promote the distribution and consumption of iron and folic acid (IFA) tablets to pregnant women to prevent complications related to anemia during pregnancy and avoid neural tube defects like spina bifida in newborns. It also aims to help 770,000 children in the two provinces receive annual doses of Vitamin A.

The 20 districts are expected to serve as a model for improved performance in pregnant women’s and young children’s micronutrient consumption, to which other districts can refer when seeking solutions to micronutrient issues.

Hidden hunger

The salvation of the first 1,000 day of a child’s life — from the nine month-pregnancy through to a child’s second birthday — is under the government’s framework of boosting people’s nutrition, according to Dobby Izwardi, Director of Community Nutrition at the MoH.

To enhance people’s nutrition, the ministry continues to promote a balanced diet to replace an old campaign titled “4 Sehat 5 Sempurna” (Four Healthy, Five Perfect).

The balanced diet guidelines have four principles: Food variation, a clean lifestyle, active lifestyle and routine control of body weight.

An imbalanced diet will lead to hidden hunger. “Unconsciously people need vitamins and minerals,



A community health volunteer counselling mothers on proper nutrition.

however small the amount, but it is not that easy to maintain it. For example, even though a child may eat a plateful of rice, he can suffer from a lack of Vitamin A because rice only contains small amounts of Vitamin A,” Dobby said.

He added that today, educating mothers about nutrition was a tough challenge due to the ever-changing environment, especially with the rapid growth of the food industry.

“We have now more choices in terms of foods but pregnant women should be aware of the importance of keeping their baby healthy by ensuring the first 1,000 days of their child’s life,” he says.

Starting from having a proper micronutrient intake, embracing a healthy lifestyle and routine check-ups at a health facility, the issue of pregnant women’s health should be tackled comprehensively, he said.

Underscoring the importance of collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, Dobby said the government should retain its strong principles regarding the handling of the first 1,000 days of a child’s life, which deals with preventive, promotional and curative programs and involves non-health sectors, such as the public works office and the ministries of agriculture, trade and industry.

To comply with Presidential Decree No. 2/2015 requiring the MoH to focus on lowering the rate of stunting among children, the ministry and its related offices have to combat stunting, with the first 1,000 days in a child’s life becoming a priority.

“Under the collaboration program with MI, micronutrients

are included in pregnant women’s routine checks, which showcases a new point in the program,” said Dobby.

Filling the gap

Meanwhile, Dr. Elvina Karyadi, Country Director of MI Indonesia, said the program was an integration of several programs, including Vitamin A for children under five, IFA for pregnant women, zinc and ORS for childhood diarrhea.

“The integrated program calls for collaboration across sectors and programs. The concept, introduced for the first time, is in line with the MoH’s existing nutrition-related program,” she said.

Principally, the collaboration allows MI to lend a hand in the existing initiatives in the government’s system instead of running a new program. “We give something that the government is lacking, which we term ‘filling the gap’ [...] that’s the principle. That’s why we have a good partnership with the government,” she said.

The government, including provincial and district administrations, then develops a sense of ownership of the initiative, which will ensure sustainability of the program. “We meet the government’s needs,” she said.

To ensure a sustainable program

in terms of funding, the East Java administration has designed a Budget Plan for Regional Nutrition and Food Action (RADPG-Rencana Aksi Daerah Pangan dan Gizi) so that when donors cease to give financial assistance in 2018, the program will continue, according to Heru.

Apart from rampant micronutrient deficiency, NTT is prone to diarrhea-related issues due to a lack of access to clean water resulting from long drought and geographical challenges, according to Joyce.

She said that villages located in remote areas had difficulties with access. “For those living in remote areas, a healthy and clean lifestyle has yet to become a culture,” she said. “Many still like to drink un-boiled water,” she added.

More trained staff are expected to be deployed in NTT so the program will reach its targets, including people living in hard-to-reach areas.

Despite the program targeting 20 districts, it will also be expanded in terms of coverage. “The prototype of the books can be copied and distributed to other districts in the two provinces and trainers [from MI] are welcome to provide capacity building training at other districts in the two provinces,” Dobby said. **(Sudibyo M. Wiradji)**

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