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Why India’s Nutrition Problem Isn’t Lack of Food – But Lack of Absorption

Nutrition is not just about what we eat. It’s about what our bodies can retain from what we eat. And that’s a problem we’re only beginning to fully understand. Satya Dev Tiwari, Chairman and Managing Director, Voll Sante Functional Foods & Nutraceuticals,

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Satya Dev Tiwari, Chairman & Managing Director, Voll Sante Functional Foods & Nutraceuticals

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Nutrition is not just about what we eat. It's about what our bodies can retain from what we eat. And that's a problem we're only beginning to fully understand. ***Satya Dev Tiwari, Chairman and Managing Director, Voll Sante Functional Foods & Nutraceuticals****, gives a glimpse of why food and nutrition cannot be interlinked. The real issue lies not in food availability, but in what the body can absorb and use*

Food insecurity remains a challenge for millions in India. But even among those who do have regular access to meals, poor nutrient absorption is a hidden epidemic. Over the years, government programmes have aimed to improve food availability, from subsidised rations to mid-day meals in schools, and many households now have access to grains, fruits, and packaged foods.

Yet, malnutrition remains stubbornly high. Nearly one in three children under five is stunted. More than half of women of reproductive age are anaemic. And deficiencies in key nutrients like iron, calcium, vitamin D, B12, and protein continue to affect people across both urban and rural areas.

So what's going wrong?

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The hidden crisis of poor nutrient absorption

Food and nutrition are not the same. A person can have access to three meals a day and still suffer from weakness, bone pain, or cognitive fatigue. That's because many of the nutrients we need - especially micronutrients like iron, zinc, calcium, and B-vitamins - are either missing in our diet, destroyed during cooking or processing, or simply not absorbed well by the body.

This 'hidden hunger' is especially prevalent in India due to a combination of factors. Chronic gut infections - often caused by poor sanitation, unclean drinking water, and subpar hygiene - silently damage the intestinal lining. This condition, known as environmental enteric dysfunction, is common in low-income settings and affects nutrient absorption even when food intake seems sufficient.

Dietary patterns add another layer to the issue. Highly processed foods, a reliance on polished grains, low intake of diverse vegetables, and insufficient healthy fats reduce the availability and absorption of key nutrients. Many Indians consume enough calories but fall short on essential bioavailable nutrients.

Add to this the growing burden of lifestyle-related gut issues - like IBS, leaky gut, or acid reflux - and the widespread use of over-the-counter antacids and antibiotics, and you have a population whose digestive systems are not primed for optimal absorption.

Even supplementation, which is often recommended as a solution, comes with its problems: not all supplements are absorbed equally well by the body.

Why Bioavailability Matters

Effective nutrition begins with digestion and ends with absorption - anything less is incomplete. This is where the concept of bioavailability becomes crucial. Bioavailability refers to the fraction of a nutrient that reaches systemic circulation and can be used by the body. It’s the difference between swallowing a supplement and benefiting from it.

Take iron, for instance. Iron supplements often cause constipation or nausea, and in some cases, they’re poorly absorbed, especially if taken with certain foods or at the wrong time.

Similarly, B12 deficiency is common even in non-vegetarians due to poor intrinsic factor production in the stomach or interference from medications. And calcium, one of the most commonly consumed supplements, varies drastically in how well they’re absorbed depending on its source and formulation.

We focus deeply on this issue of bioavailability. We believe better absorption, not just higher intake, is key to long-term health. One area where this has been especially clear is calcium.

The Calcium Absorption Gap - and What We Can Do About It

Calcium is vital not only for bones, but also for muscle function, nerve signalling, and heart health. And yet, despite abundant sources of calcium in the Indian diet - milk, curd, ragi, leafy greens - calcium deficiency is still common, particularly among women, children, and the elderly.

One reason is that many traditional calcium supplements are made from inorganic sources like limestone, marble, or animal shells. These are not only hard to digest but may also come with contaminants like heavy metals. More importantly, the body doesn't absorb them efficiently.

This insight led us to develop Calgal Plus, a plant-based calcium supplement derived from red marine algae (Lithothamnium calcareum), which we source from the clean coastal waters of Iceland and Ireland. This form of calcium has a naturally porous structure and comes with 72 trace minerals, magnesium, and vitamin D3 - all of which work synergistically to enhance absorption. We've also included vitamin K2-7, which ensures that calcium is directed into bones rather than soft tissues like arteries, reducing long-term health risks.

The goal with Calgal Plus isn't to just increase calcium intake - it's to solve the more fundamental problem of how calcium is absorbed and used by the body. That's where we believe meaningful impact can be made.

A Broader Shift Toward Smarter Nutrition

What's true for calcium applies across the board. India's nutrition challenge is no longer about how much we eat, but how smartly we nourish ourselves. This includes everything from improving gut health, focusing on diverse, whole foods, and using supplements that are thoughtfully formulated with absorption in mind.

Policy efforts also need to evolve in this direction. Fortified foods are a start, but we must also educate communities on how to pair nutrients for better absorption, such as taking iron with vitamin C, or combining fat-soluble vitamins with healthy oils. Functional foods, digestive health, and clinically backed supplementation will play a much greater role in the coming years.

The Way Forward

Solving India’s nutrition problem means going beyond hunger. It requires us to ask harder questions about what our bodies are getting from the food and supplements we consume. It means focusing on gut health, on choosing nutrient sources that the body can work with, and on using modern nutritional science to bridge the gap between intake and impact.

We’re encouraged by the growing awareness around these issues among doctors, parents, and consumers. But there’s still much work to be done. In the end, real nutrition doesn’t happen on the plate - it happens in the cells. And for that, absorption is everything.

Read online: https://nuffoodsspectrum.in/views/24/22618/why-indias-nutrition-problem-isnt-lack-of-food-but-lack-of-absorption.html
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