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Forging Effective Strategies to Combat Iron Deficiency

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Food Fortification: Where Are We in Terms of Iron Compounds?

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Background: Countries in the Americas are already implementing iron fortification programs. Nevertheless, little has been achieved in the reduction of iron deficiency anemia. One of the problems some food fortification programs face is related to the use of iron compounds that are not bioavailable. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) organized a technical consultation to review state-of-the-art information on iron compounds and their bioavailability, organoleptic characteristics, technological compatibility, and cost, in order to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of the different compounds for food fortification.

Purpose: This presentation reports on the recommendations of the technical consultation on the best iron compounds available for mass fortification and targeted fortification for use in the region.

Results: Wheat and corn flour are important components of the diet in most countries in the region of the Americas. Daily per capita consumption of wheat flour in the region amounts to 60 g, while in many countries, the figure for corn flour is more than 100 g. These two products represent excellent vehicles for providing additional iron on a regular basis. In fact, more than 20 countries are already fortifying wheat flour with iron, and several are also adding iron to corn flour. Recommendations were established for mass fortification of both wheat and corn flour, assuming that most adolescents and adults consume them regularly. In addition, recommendations were established for targeted fortification, particularly for infants and pre-school and school age children.

Discussion: Although several iron compounds are available in the market, the recommendations will provide clear guidelines that the countries may use to review their programs for iron fortification. The adoption of the guidelines will, in turn, ensure that iron fortification is effective in providing iron compounds that are bioavailable at the optimum cost.