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Kerala government to fortify rice for kids with micro-nutrients

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: As anaemia, stunting, wasting and underweight continue to be major concerns among children aged under five in state, the government has decided to fortify the rice, distributed through anganwadis for beneficiary children, with micro-nutrients.

The decision was taken after the national family and health survey conducted by the Centre showed that these factors (which affect the health of children) either remain above the national average or have not made remarkable reduction when compared to the previous survey.

Also, secretary of ministry of women and child development Rakesh Srivastava had written to chief secretary Tom Jose to take up the fortification initiative. "The initiative is being rolled out as a collaborative effort of state, Centre and world food programme of the UN. On a pilot basis, the programme will be launched in Kannur soon," a top government official said.

The content of essential micronutrients in food will be improved through fortification of rice that are both served for lunch in anganwadis as well as which is given away as takeaway ration for the children. The fortification will be done using iron, folic acid, cyanocobalamin, zinc, vitamin A, riboflavin, niacin, pyridoxine and thiamine.

The fortification facility will be set up near Food Corporation of India facility where the rice is stored and it will be transported to anganwadis through Supplyco. A NABL-accredited laboratory will be on board to carry the retention analysis of the fortified rice.

The fortification will be done as per the standards specified in the regulations laid down by Food Safety and Standards Authority of India.

As per the latest national family and health survey (NFHS-4), though the percentage of anaemic children has reduced to 35.6% from 44.5% in the state when compared to previous survey, every third child in the under-five age group of the state is anaemic. Moreover, the under-five children in seven districts of the state is above the state average. The survey had found that in Malappuram, every second child was seen as anaemic. The anaemic status of children in Wayanad, Kannur and Palakkad are also an area of major concern.

The survey found that there is only a minimal decrease in the status of under-five wasted children, from 15.9 in NFHS-3 to 15.7 in NFHS-4. The data showed that seven of the 14 districts in the state were above the state average in wasting status and three are above the national average. Alarming, there has been an increase of severely wasted children from 4.1% in previous survey to 6.5%.

The reduction in stunting among children in the state is not at the same rate of reduction at the national level. Though it reduced to 19.7% from 24.5% in the latest survey, the reduction at national level was significant. Six districts in the state are above the state average, with Wayanad having the highest (27.7%) number of stunted children and Ernakulam(12.4%), the lowest.