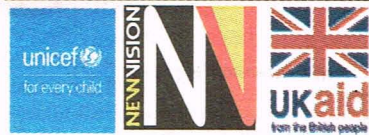




IN PARTNERSHIP WITH...



By Jonan Tusingwire

In the past, mothers in Kamwenge district believed practices such as introducing other foods before six months were normal.

Zuraika Akankwasa, a mother of four and resident of Kitonzi cell in Kitonzi ward, Kamwenge town council, said she previously did not know the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and ensuring a newborn accessed colostrum immediately after birth.

"I would first give the baby warm water using a spoon immediately after birth because I thought that was the right thing to do," she said.

When she went to Padiripiyo Health Centre III for antenatal care, health workers educated her on the importance of initiating breastfeeding immediately after birth and explained that denying a baby colostrum deprives them of important nutrients.

She also admitted that before receiving nutrition education, she introduced soup to her babies before they were six months old.

"At the facility, I was told that was wrong because babies are supposed to depend entirely on breast milk for the first six months," she added.

Robinah Tushabemukama, a mother of five and resident of Kitonzi, said she previously breastfed her children only when they cried, not knowing that babies are supposed to breastfeed frequently throughout the day.

"Before getting sensitised at the facility, I had no idea that a child is supposed to breastfeed at least eight times a day. Since my children were not always crying, sometimes I would only breastfeed them three times a day," she said.

Tushabemukama said the health education sessions transformed her understanding of infant feeding practices.

"I now even wake my babies from sleep to breastfeed them so that I can reach eight times a day and even more," she said.

Health workers emphasise that proper breastfeeding practices and good maternal nutrition are essential in ensuring healthy growth, brain development and strong immunity among children, especially during the first 1,000 days of life. They add that this can help children overcome malnutrition, which is prevalent in the district.

MALNUTRITION BURDEN

A recent food and nutrition assessment found that chronic malnutrition in Kamwenge district

KAMWENGE PROMOTING EARLY NUTRITION TO END MALNUTRITION

What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. Through a month-long campaign from April to May, *New Vision*, in partnership with UNICEF and the Ministry of Health, is spotlighting the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start.



Bwambale addressing residents on nutrition in Kamwenge district recently. Mothers are encouraged to pay attention to the nutrition of their children in the first 1,000 days after conception

stands at 41%, significantly above the World Health Organisation threshold of 30%.

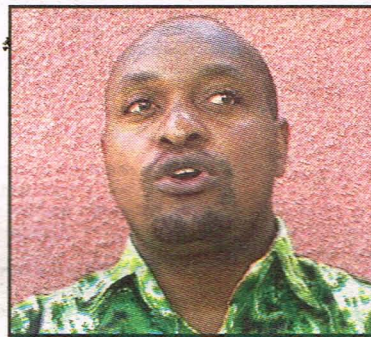
At Rukungyu General Hospital, the burden remains visible. As of December 2024, the facility was admitting between 60 and 90 children suffering from malnutrition every month, out of nearly 3,000 patients seen. More than 200 cases were reported from sub-counties, including Nkoma, Kiziba and Busiriba.

Hospital records also show that the facility handled an average of 90 referrals every month for critical care linked to malnutrition, while nearly half of all paediatric admissions were associated with nutritional deficiencies.

The financial strain has also been significant. By the same period, the hospital administration revealed that about sh150m annually, nearly a third of its total budget, was being spent on addressing malnutrition-related cases.

THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS MATTER

To stem the tide, district authorities say one of the most critical interventions in fighting malnutrition is protecting a child during the first 1,000 days of life, that is, from conception to a child's second birthday.



Nutritionist: Emmanuel Tumusiime

This period determines a child's physical growth, brain development and future health, according to Bernard Bwambale, the national co-ordinator at Food Safety Coalition of Uganda and head of programmes at CONSENT, a consumer protection organisation.

"When a mother conceives, the 1,000 days start. These days require nutrients because without them, the foetus cannot grow well," he said.

Bwambale explained that nutrients such as proteins, folic acid, zinc and iron are essential during pregnancy because they support the formation of body tissues, organs and the brain.

"If these nutrients are lacking in a mother's diet, the child is likely

to suffer congenital deformities," he warned.

After birth, Bwambale said, nutrition must continue through exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, since breastmilk contains all nutrients required for growth and disease protection. He also emphasised breastfeeding within the first hour after delivery, adding that the first milk contains colostrum, which is a natural immune booster packed with antibodies.

DISTRICT TURNS TO PREVENTION

The district has shifted focus towards preventive interventions aimed at reducing malnutrition, especially among children and vulnerable mothers.

One of the major strategies is continuous sensitisation of mothers on breastfeeding, which Emmanuel Tumusiime, the district nutrition focal person, says is critical for growth, immunity and long-term development. This education is mainly carried out at health facilities where women seek antenatal care and immunisation services.

Health workers use these visits to teach mothers proper infant feeding practices and early childcare. The district also works with village health

BABY-FRIENDLY HEALTH INITIATIVE

To ensure the best care during the first 1,000 days of a child's life, Emmanuel Tumusiime, the district nutrition focal person, said they have opted for the Baby-Friendly Health Facility Initiative, which supports mothers from pregnancy.

Under this programme, women receive support from the time pregnancy is confirmed. Health workers provide counselling sessions, helping women prepare for breastfeeding, safe motherhood and infant nutrition.

"Through these sessions, mothers are prepared to breastfeed their babies effectively and are guided on the role of exclusive breastfeeding in improving immunity, nutrition and overall well-being of children," Tumusiime said.

The programme also includes regular measurement of mothers and children using materials provided by the Government, that help families understand growth indicators and their connection to nutrition and child health.

teams.

Another major intervention is growth monitoring and promotion, where children are regularly assessed both in villages and health facilities to identify warning signs of malnutrition and respond before cases become severe.

BEYOND HEALTH FACILITIES

The district is also implementing a Community Health Empowerment Initiative under Primary Health Care, supported by UNICEF, aimed at encouraging communities to take responsibility for improving their own nutrition and health outcomes.

Health workers engage communities in discussions on sanitation, feeding practices and health challenges while encouraging families to identify practical local solutions.

"We talk to the communities to look to themselves and find out what they can do," Tumusiime said.

He said these interventions have helped bring positive results. Communities find it easier to identify malnourished children and take them to facilities for treatment. More locals are aware of when they should eat what and the things to avoid when feeding their children.