

# Pack 107, Item 7

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# Prevent blindness with vitamin A

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**HOST:** If your children are having trouble seeing, you probably want to put something special over their eyes—a pair of eyeglasses. But for a common kind of vision problem, the kind that starts when a child has trouble seeing in dim light, you should put something special in their stomachs.

The special something you should put in your children’s stomachs is vitamin A. Vitamin A prevents blindness. Night blindness and dry eye are the kinds of blindness caused by a lack of vitamin A.

Sometimes night blindness is called chicken eye, because children trip over things in the half-light before sunrise or after sundown, the way chickens trip when there isn’t much light.

It is also called nutritional blindness, because it is caused by a lack of the nutrient vitamin A. One thing to watch for is children who just sit quietly when the light is dim. If they have night blindness and were teased for tripping, they may just be too embarrassed to walk around.

If children with night blindness don’t get extra vitamin A, they can develop dry eye. The doctor’s name for dry eye is xerophthalmia (pronounced zer-e-thalmia). With dry eye, parts of the eye lose their natural moisture, making it more and more difficult for the eye to see. Finally no light can get into the eye at all, and the child goes completely blind.

Blindness isn’t the only danger. Children who don’t get enough vitamin A often have more severe diarrhea or respiratory illnesses. This is because vitamin A helps the body fight against infection. It helps the body make a protective layer around our throats and the tubes of our stomachs.

In fact, even if there are no signs of dry eye, if children are not getting enough vitamin A, they are at a higher risk for severe infections and diseases, and are more likely to die. Measles is one disease that is especially dangerous for children who don’t get enough vitamin A. These children often go blind soon after having measles, and many of them die.

The need for vitamin A is greatest when children are growing. This is why children between six months and six years old are most likely to show the signs of too little vitamin A.

Vitamin A deficiency often starts if a mother stops breastfeeding too soon, so it is important to breastfeed as long as possible. Children are at risk for night blindness when they start to eat solid food. That is the time when they are growing very fast but are no longer getting enough vitamin A from their mother’s milk. Children who are not given breastmilk at all are much more likely to lack vitamin A.

So, how can you make sure your children get enough vitamin A to prevent night blindness, dry eye, and other diseases? The first way is to breastfeed babies as long as possible. Then, as soon as they start on solid food, give them regular portions of food containing vitamin A. Good sources are some kinds of animal foods, orange and yellow fruits and vegetables, and dark green, leafy vegetables.

Here are some examples of the best foods to eat for vitamin A. Organ meats, eggs yolks, and dairy products like milk, butter, cheese, and yogurt are all sources of vitamin A. Liver is packed with nutrients, so even an egg-sized portion of liver is a very high source of vitamin A.

Yellow and orange vegetables, like carrots, pumpkins, squash, and orange and yellow sweet potatoes are good sources of vitamin A. Some fruit sources of vitamin A are apricots, mangoes, oranges, and papayas.

You can also get vitamin A from dark green leafy vegetables like spinach, amaranth, kale, and the leaves of cassava, sweet potato, and cowpeas.

Red palm oil is a high source of vitamin A. But don’t overheat the oil because when its red colour goes away, vitamin A also disappears.

These fruits and vegetables are good for children, and they should eat them as soon as they start eating solid food. Pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding should try to get extra vitamin A for their newborns by eating more of these fruits, vegetables, and animal foods like dairy products and liver.

There are a couple of important things to remember when preparing these foods.

One is that our bodies can’t absorb vitamin A if we don’t eat fat with vitamin A-rich foods.

Also, when preparing vegetables, it is important not to overcook them, because this can cause some of their vitamin A to be lost. So if, for example, you quickly stir fry vegetables with a bit of fat, the vegetables still have a lot of vitamin A and you get the fat you need to absorb it.

It’s also important to dry vegetables in the shade rather than in the sun to keep in more vitamin A.

For children who already have night blindness, it’s important to act quickly. They should get vitamin A supplements—usually in the form of a capsule—from the health centre or health workers.

If children get vitamin A early in life, there is a very good chance their sight will become normal and they will grow up strong and healthy. But the longer they go without enough vitamin A, the worse their eyes will get.

Young children who get measles should also receive a vitamin A capsule to protect their eyes and their life. But these vitamin A capsules are strong. You should only use them as advised by a health worker.

Getting too much vitamin A in pills may be dangerous. These capsules are best for children and adults who already lack vitamin A in their body.

Remember that the best way to prevent dry eye and other problems due to lack of vitamin A is to eat foods that contain vitamin A. Your family should eat lots of animal foods such as eggs, liver, milk, and fish oil, orange or yellow fruits and vegetables, and dark, green, leafy vegetables.

## Acknowledgements

This script was originally distributed in 1996 as [Package 39, Script 3](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/package-39-creative-gardening/prevent-blindness-with-vitamin-a/). It was updated and then re-reviewed by Erika Rodning, RD, Farm Radio International, Arusha, Tanzania.

**Sources of information**

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**Sources of vitamin A**

*Animal foods*

Animal liver (best source)

Butter

Cheese

Egg yolks

Milk

Organ meats, especially liver

Yogurt

*Orange and yellow fruits and vegetables*

Apricots

Carrots

Mangoes

Orange and yellow sweet potatoes

Oranges

Papaya

Pumpkin

Squash

*Dark green, leafy vegetables*

Amaranth

Cassava leaves

Cowpea leaves

Kale

Spinach

Sweet potato leaves

*Other foods*

Red palm oil

Roselle (hibiscus) leaves

*Basella alba* (alugbati), leaves
*Colocasia esculenta* (taro), leaves

*Ipomoea aquatica* (swamp cabbage), leaves

*Moringa oleifera* (moringa), leaves

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