

Rice alone is not enough, says a UNICEF nutrition specialist

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ONE of the more well informed among Cambodia's NGO nutrition community, UNICEF's Joel Conkle says "animal sources" of food are packed with vitamins and minerals, and even though vegetable food sources may contain vitamins and minerals, they are often difficult for the body to absorb, especially in the case of iron.

Conkle is a nutrition specialist at UNICEF's Cambodia Country Office working in the Child Survival Program. He says in Cambodia pregnant women and young children are important because they need additional calories as well as additional vitamins and minerals to support healthy growth.

"To provide these extra calories, vitamins and minerals, a variety of food is needed. For a child, rice porridge, known locally as bobor or rice with some soup, is not enough," he said.

Conkle recommends Cambodians get extra calories from oils and fats, by adding a little bit of oil to each and every meal. For extra vitamins and minerals, he says animal food is the best source.

"The addition of an egg, fish or some meat to bobor at least once a day will improve the nutrition of the child. Vegetables and fruit also contain important vitamins and minerals and should be a regular part of the child's diet," he said.

"It is also important to realise that children have a small stomach. If too much water is given to a child, they will not be able to get enough calories. This is why bobor for young children should be made thick – thick enough to not drip or fall off of the spoon."

Conkle is also a strong advocate of breastfeeding, even after a child starts receiving food.

"It is recommended to keep breastfeeding until two years of age. Breast milk provides the liquid that a child needs and also contains nutrients for good nutrition."

Conkle added that people should always wash their hands before preparing a meal.

"Wash your own and child's hands with soap and water every time before feeding and have a separate bowl and spoon for each child. Put the recommended amount of food into each child's bowl," he said.

When feeding children, Conkle says parents should keep the child on their lap and actively feed by making eye contact, giving encouragement and spending enough time feeding the child in order to make sure the child finishes their food.