

Response to invited commentary : Vitamin D3 supplementation for 8 weeks leads to improved haematological status following the consumption of an iron-fortified breakfast cereal: a double-blind randomised controlled trial in iron-deficient women

Item Type	Article
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Citation	Ahmad Fuzi, S., & Mushtaq, S. (2020). Response to invited commentary : Vitamin D3 supplementation for 8 weeks leads to improved haematological status following the consumption of an iron-fortified breakfast cereal: A double-blind randomised controlled trial in iron-deficient women. British Journal of Nutrition, 125(5), 598-600. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007114520001683
DOI	10.1017/S0007114520001683
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Journal	British Journal of Nutrition
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-05-11 09:39:45
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/623548

1 **Response to invited commentary : Vitamin D₃ supplementation for 8 weeks leads to improved**
2 **haematological status following the consumption of an iron-fortified breakfast cereal: a**
3 **double-blind randomised controlled trial in iron-deficient women. (1-2)**

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15 We would like to respond to the invited commentary by Blanco-Rojo⁽¹⁾ pertaining to our published
16 findings on the improvement of iron-status indices following an eight-week vitamin D
17 supplementation with iron-fortified cereals in UK iron-deficient women⁽²⁾. The key findings of our
18 study supported the study hypothesis and suggest a role for vitamin D in iron regulation. In
19 particular, our study demonstrated a significant effect of vitamin D3 supplementation in improving
20 the participants' iron status, indicated by the increase in haemoglobin concentrations and
21 haematocrit levels, despite the non-significant changes in hepcidin and ferritin concentrations. The
22 commentary author correctly pointed out that low hepcidin concentration may have hindered the
23 detection of a possible decrease. This is plausible, as the recruited participants for the study were
24 iron deficient. Ganz *et al.*⁽³⁾ who developed and validated the first ELISA specific for hepcidin,
25 reported that serum hepcidin concentrations were undetectable in 18-19 iron-deficient patients.
26 Multiple clinical factors that may be present simultaneously, have been shown to influence the
27 concentration of circulating hepcidin⁽⁴⁾. A potential decrease may be insufficient to be observed due
28 to the lack of sensitivity of the immunoassay used in the study which actually recognises all
29 isoforms of hepcidin (-20, -22, -24, and -25). Hepcidin exists in various isoforms⁽⁵⁾, and hepcidin-25
30 has been distinctively identified to play a role in iron regulation⁽⁶⁾ with unclear underlying
31 mechanisms^(7; 8).

32
33 Focusing on the use of breakfast cereals in the study, Blanco-Rojo⁽¹⁾ inferred that the presence of
34 phytic acid, calcium, and casein in the milk, with the lack of ascorbic acid, might inhibit iron
35 absorption, which resulted in no statistically significant increase in ferritin concentrations and this
36 cannot be ruled out due to the nature of the phytate content of breakfast cereals in particular.
37 However, depending on the conditions and chemical forms of iron itself (haem or non-haem)⁽⁹⁾, the
38 overall percentage of iron absorption for an individual is reported to be classically low, and ranges
39 from as low as 5% to as high as 35%⁽¹⁰⁾. Previous studies that used cereal-based meals also reported
40 a wide range of iron absorption, of between 0.56% and 18.8%^(11; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16). The amount of
41 phytates in ready-made cereal products varied from 0.05% to 3.29%⁽¹⁷⁾. A molar ratio of < 1:1 for
42 phytates and iron in a meal was proposed to counteract the inhibition effect of phytates on the iron
43 absorption; however, it was shown that phytates can still interfere with iron absorption at a ratio of
44 as low as 0.2:1⁽¹⁴⁾. However, no means of measuring phytates was carried out in our study, which
45 should be taken into account in future research in order to make a fair comparison in terms of the
46 effect of phytates in the intervention food product on iron absorption in general. Cereals and cereal
47 products represent the highest percentage of food (38%) that contributes to iron intake among UK
48 women based on the latest National Dietary Nutrition Survey (NDNS)⁽¹⁸⁾, where high-fibre
49 breakfast cereals represented 7%. This explains why it was selected as means of providing dietary

50 iron to the participants in our study. The use of semi-skimmed milk in the study provides
51 approximately 250 mg of calcium with no clear underlying mechanism on how calcium affects iron
52 uptake and bioavailability⁽¹⁹⁾. A dose-dependent effect of 40 to 600 mg of calcium in foods on iron
53 absorption was observed in one of the earliest studies by Hallberg *et al.*⁽²⁰⁾. In a recent study, Candia
54 *et al.*⁽²¹⁾ investigated the effects of various calcium salts on non-haem iron bioavailability in fasted
55 women of childbearing age and found 800 mg of supplemental calcium citrate significantly
56 decreased non-haem iron bioavailability. Additionally, several studies have reported conflicting
57 findings, due to factors such as; variations in the forms of calcium; differing administration routes,
58 including within foods in a single meal; complex meals; or as supplements; in addition to varied
59 doses^(20; 22; 23; 24; 25).

60

61 Blanco-Rojo⁽¹⁾ suggested that the food fortification vehicles used in previous studies may have
62 contributed to low iron absorption in the first place, but the limited number of recent iron
63 fortification studies carried out in various settings have reported discrepancies in the improvement
64 of iron status biomarkers (**Table 1**). There was no significant increase in the daily iron intake in our
65 study, however, the intake was 1.7-fold higher at baseline, relative to typical iron intake of adult
66 women reported in the NDNS, which accounted to approximately 116% of the UK RNI. We agree
67 that future RCTs should consider the importance of addressing the use of food products that take
68 into account the bioavailability of both iron and vitamin D. Findings from such studies have the
69 potential to provide an alternative or adjunct route to manage iron deficiency, as opposed to the
70 therapeutic oral iron therapy that can lead to poor adherence due to the adverse gastrointestinal
71 events.

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73 **Conflicts of interest**

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75 There were no conflicts of interest and this research received no specific grant from any funding
76 agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Table 1 Recent iron fortification studies using cereal and cereal-based products

Study	Population /Mean age (SD) or range	Intervention/Duration	Main findings/Comments
[1]	ID women (n=50) 27.4 (9.4) yrs	Iron-fortified cereal/ 8 weeks	Mean (SD) Hb concentration was significantly higher at post-intervention in the vitamin D group (13.84 (0.98) g/dl) compared to placebo group (12.83 (1.25) g/dl) (p<0.05).
[2]	Children (n=112) 6-12 yrs	Iron-fortified biscuits (high or low iron) 4 months	Mean (SD) Hb concentration was significantly higher at post-intervention in the high iron group (10.52 (0.81) g/dl) compared to low iron group (10.03 (0.73) g/dl) (p<0.01). The study showed Hb concentration can be increased in 4 months. The present study showed that Hb concentration is increased at a shorter duration of 8 weeks. The high iron group received 30 mg of iron/serving of biscuits, whilst iron-fortified cereal used in the present study consisted of 9 mg iron/serving.
[3]	Children (n=47) 3-6 yrs	A: Fortified biscuit (FS) B: Fortified biscuit (HIC) C: Placebo biscuit 10 weeks	Mean (SD) Hb concentration was significantly higher at post-intervention in A (14.9 (0.2) g/dl) and B (14.7 (0.3) g/dl) compared to placebo group (15.3 (0.3) g/dl) (p<0.05). Participants in group C were non-anaemic for comparison with anaemic participants in group A and B, hence the higher Hb concentration at post-intervention. None of the other iron status biomarkers measured in the study (RBC, MCV, MCH, MCHC, and SF) were affected by the intervention, comparable to the present study.
[4]	Adolescents (n=71) 6-19 yrs	Iron-fortified or unfortified breakfast cereals 12 weeks	Mean (SD) SF concentration was significantly higher at post-intervention in the intervention group (22.1 (16.7) µg/l) compared to unfortified group (18.4 (11.6) µg/l) (p<0.001). The study found no effect of intervention on the other iron biomarkers including Hb, Hct and MCV, contrary to the present study. The participants in the study were not ID as opposed to the present study, but were recruited based on riboflavin status (EGRAC > 1.4 and Hb < 13.7 g/dl). The significant observation reported in the study may be due to a longer study duration, as opposed to 8 weeks in the present study.

[1] Fuzi and Mushtaq⁽²⁾ (UK); [2] Bal *et al.* ⁽²⁶⁾ (India); [3] Quintero-Gutiérrez *et al.* ⁽²⁷⁾ (Mexico); [4] Powers *et al.* ⁽²⁸⁾ (UK)

Abbreviations: Hb: haemoglobin; SF: serum ferritin; RBC: red blood cell; MCV: mean corpuscular volume; MCH: mean corpuscular haemoglobin; MCHC: mean corpuscular haemoglobin concentration; FS: ferrous sulphate; HIC: haem iron concentrate; EGRAC: erythrocyte glutathione reductase activation coefficient

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