

An 'Image Problem' for a Food That Could Save African Lives

People who do not get enough vitamin A in their diet may develop night blindness. But in the developing world a lack of vitamin A causes much more serious harm to children. The World Health Organization links vitamin A deficiency to as many as two hundred fifty thousand child deaths every year.

One excellent source of vitamin A is found in sweet potatoes with orange flesh. Orange sweet potatoes contain high levels of beta-carotene, which the body changes into vitamin A. Experts say orange sweet potatoes specially bred for growing conditions in Africa could help solve the lack of vitamin A there.

But, first, more people will need to be persuaded to eat them. Jan Low with the International Potato Center, a research organization, says the sweet potato needs a better image in Africa. Ms. Low explains that sweet potatoes are mainly grown by poor women to feed their families in case another crop fails. The sweet potatoes commonly grown in Africa have white or yellow flesh. But, more importantly, they are low in vitamin A.

Dan Gustafson heads the Washington office of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

He points to efforts in the past to increase the popularity of other nutritious crops. He says most of these efforts failed because organizers of the campaigns did not consider what people wanted to eat. But Mr. Gustafson sees a better chance for the efforts to increase the popularity of the orange sweet potato in Africa. For one thing, except for the color, the vegetable is similar to what people already use.

According to Dan Gustafson "it is because you have got advertising and you have got a difference that is not radical, that [...] it will work."