

Personal Stories:

Seeing first-hand how iodized salt eliminates iodine deficiency disorders in Cambodia

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In 1997, Bona Khoy was a UNICEF Communication Assistant documenting the impact of IDD in Cambodia. Now a Communication Officer, he recently revisited one family and saw first-hand how iodized salt had made a difference in their lives.

I first met Sorn Ratha, a girl in Toul Monorum village, Kratie province, north-east Cambodia, fifteen years ago, as a UNICEF film maker accompanying program colleagues as they conducted a comprehensive survey on IDD. Sorn Ratha looked younger than her thirteen years and had a large swelling on the right side of her neck. She had no idea

a happily married 28-year-old and the mother of two healthy children. Her life was transformed by her encounter with the IDD team in 1997. "I didn't know what the swelling was until a group of official people came to visit my family and told us about this problem. Since then, I realized that almost my whole family had goiter" says Sorn Ratha.

Watch the video:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUn3Ag0vAQ0>



Sorn Ratha, aged thirteen, with goiter
 © UNICEF Cambodia/1997/Thearith TITH

what it was and neither did her sisters aged nine and six, her brother aged four, nor her mother, who all had similar swellings. Back then, many people used to think the swellings were caused by swallowing the hard seeds of certain fruit or by working too much.

In August 2012, I revisited Toul Monorum village and met Sorn Ratha again. She is now



Sorn Ratha, now 28 years old, is healthy and a happily married mother with two children
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Cambodian children benefit from iodized salt

Lack of iodine can cause brain damage, growth retardation and learning difficulties. Iodine is especially essential for women of childbearing age, because lack of it can cause miscarriage, stillbirth and mental retardation. Sorn Ratha and her family had developed goiter because in Toul Monorum village along the Mekong River, there is very little naturally occurring iodine in the soil or water. The area is exposed to heavy rainfall and periodic floods, which also leach iodine from the soil, so that its crops lack this vital micronutrient.

According to UNICEF Nutrition Officer, Un Sam Oeun, "When we came here in 1997...we observed that many middle-aged women and children had goiter. We could see them everywhere, on the street and in their communities."

The 1997 survey found that 17 per cent of people in Cambodia had goiter (almost two million) and over five million more were at risk. As an immediate response to the high incidence of IDD, the Royal Government of Cambodia adopted a strategy of Universal Salt Iodization (USI) and stepped up the supply of iodized salt throughout the country. With funding from United States Agency for International Development (USAID),

UNICEF has continued to support the government to encourage iodization of national salt production, enforce USI legislation, and promote the consumption of iodized salt. The strategy made a huge difference to Sorn Ratha. She cooks with iodized salt every day having learned that it will keep her family healthy and make her children smart.

Without iodine her life would have turned out very differently given the inevitable impact on her physical growth and development. "The team from the organization told us to use iodized salt in order to eliminate the goiter and we started to use it and the goiter disappeared. All of our family members got rid of goiter. I continue to use iodized salt for cooking because it makes us healthy and it improves our memory. It really caught my attention when I also heard on radio and TV that the use of iodized salt everyday makes us healthy and it makes our children smart." Sorn Ratha said.

I also learned a great deal from my meeting with Sorn Ratha and her family. Having seen and documented the difference 'before' and 'after' the use of iodized salt, I can personally attest to the benefits of iodine and have never failed to urge everyone I meet to use iodized salt.