

Fortified rice taste test

Packed with nutrients, but how does it taste?

Tasting study

In the spring of 2014, a group of volunteers gathered near the busy 56 Wards Market in Yangon to conduct a study. With the help of staff from PATH and the Burnet Institute, the volunteers readied their equipment to test 30 participants carefully chosen to represent a cross-section of the community.

Their goal: to determine if consumers could tell the difference between three bowls of seemingly identical rice.



Volunteers set up three rice cookers to prepare samples of fortified and unfortified rice. Photo: PATH/Seema Kapoor

The difference: micronutrients

The study volunteers, from Myanmar Red Cross and the country's Maternal and Child Welfare Association, were conducting a taste test pitting two kinds of unfortified rice against a blend of grains fortified with micro-nutrients.

The fortified grains are designed to deliver essential micronutrients—including iron, folic acid, vitamin A, thiamine and zinc—that otherwise might be missing from local diets. At a ratio of 99 traditional grains of rice for every 1 grain of fortified rice, the idea is to produce a nutrient-rich blend that looks, feels, smells and tastes nearly identical to unfortified rice.

Fortified rice is already making a difference for millions of people in India, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Mali and Vietnam. Along with groups at two other markets in Myanmar, the volunteers in Yangon were helping PATH to determine not only whether the taste testers could pick out the fortified rice, but also if local consumers were likely to buy and eat the rice blend if it became available in their local markets.

“One participant tasted the rice five times and still could not pick a single sample that tasted different”

Khin Khin Cho, study volunteer

Bridging gaps, building markets

In Myanmar, the need for better nutrition is telling. For example, six in ten preschoolers and half of pregnant women suffer from anemia, which can stunt the growth of young children, cause problems for newborns, and reduce the productivity of the entire population.

Adding micronutrient-rich grains to the rice people eat every day is one of the most cost-effective ways to bridge nutritional gaps. And since it does not require people to change their diet or behavior, it is less disruptive than many other interventions.

Our work with the Myanmar National Nutrition Centre under the Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health and Sports, United Nations agencies and private-sector partners to build a sustainable market for fortified rice holds promise of supporting the country's efforts to improve the lives of people, especially vulnerable women and children.



A girl in Myanmar, her cheeks and nose covered with a traditional cosmetic, takes part in our taste test comparing unfortified rice with a fortified blend. Photo: PATH/Seema Kapoor

Which rice is it?

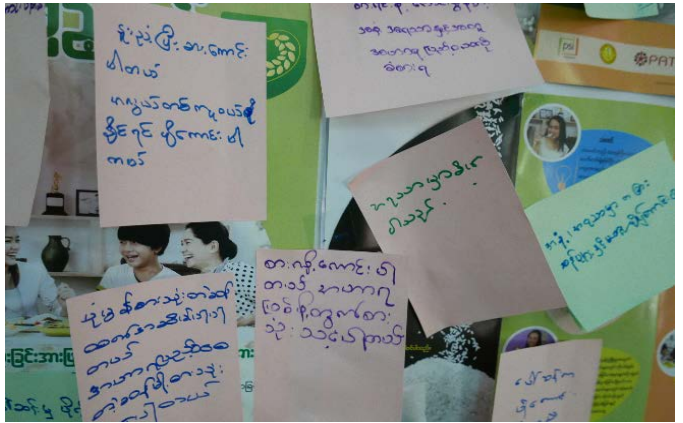
Back at the testing sites, crowds gathered around the tasters as they sampled rice from one bowl over another, rating taste, color and appearance. They also commented on the stickiness, hardness, and chewiness of the rice. Their ratings were collected to confirm whether the fortified blend will be acceptable to consumers—and to tweak production of the fortified grains so the blend more closely resembles the rice they normally eat.

“I thought it would taste very different to my rice – but it looks and smells and tastes like really good quality rice”

Each study participant was then requested to choose the bowl of rice that tasted different. In the end, roughly two-thirds of participants chose incorrectly. They identified the unfortified rice as the fortified blend, as they were unable to differentiate between the two types by taste.



A mother takes the taste test while her daughter looks on. About half of pregnant women in Myanmar have anemia. PATH/Seema Kapoor



Consumers share their thoughts on “feedback walls” in fortified rice informational and sampling sessions. PATH/Jenny Boylan

What the people say

PATH is sharing a taste of fortified rice with the public across Myanmar. By organizing informational sessions on nutrition and distributing samples of fortified rice to families in both rural and urban areas, PATH is giving men, women, and children the opportunity to digest what fortified rice is all about, then share what they have to say.

“Fortified rice tastes better than normal rice. The smell is really good and the flavor is great.”

“I feel that I am receiving real nutrients when I’m eating fortified rice.”

“I think my family would like this, it tastes better than normal rice – and I know it’s good for my kids”

Experiences like this will help PATH know if a fortified blend of rice can be assimilated into the lives of Myanmar women and children.

For more information, contact Dr. Phyo Win Htun, PATH Fortified Rice Project Coordinator, at phtun@path.org.

Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund

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