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Introduction

People's eating habits can have a big effect on their health. Even what is eaten in the earliest years may affect someone's health much later on in life.

A COMA Working Group on Weaning and the Weaning Diet (Department of Health, 1994)* has issued advice on the sort of diet that infants should be given when they first start on solid food. A survey on the food and nutrient intakes of British infants aged 6-12 months (Mills and Tyler, 1992)* and the National Diet and Nutrition Survey of preschool children aged 1½ to 4½ years (Gregory et al., 1995)* have investigated the types of foods that infants** and young children*** are eating and how these affect their growth and health.

Findings showed that young children today are, on average, taller and heavier than they were 30 years ago and in general they are healthy, but there are still some things that can be improved.
A healthy start

Breast feeding is best for babies. Breast milk provides all the nutrients that are needed for healthy development of babies in the first months of life, it is easily digested, hygienic, less likely to cause constipation, and contains antibodies that help babies to fight infections. There is also mounting evidence that breastfed babies have several health and developmental advantages in the longer term.

The best time to start is as soon as possible after the baby is born, as it can be difficult to begin later on. Starting and then stopping for a while is not advisable since it can be difficult for someone to re-start if they change their mind. It's also better to feed only with the breast because if formula milk is given as well the baby's desire to suck may be reduced and so cut down the supply of breast milk.

A woman needs a healthy, balanced diet while breast feeding. Ensuring that she has some exercise, all the rest she needs and help from those around her will also help her to breast feed successfully.

If someone does plan to use formula milk, they should be advised to consider whether it will be difficult to find the time, facilities and equipment needed to prepare the formula milk properly. They also need to take into account the greater costs involved in purchasing bottle feeding equipment and infant formula. Advice should also emphasise the importance to a baby's health of carefully following the instructions for making up and using formula milk. These should include: using the correct amounts of powder and water; using only boiled water, not bottled mineral water; and sterilising all equipment before use.

Breast milk is best for a new baby and it can also provide the main drink throughout the first year of life.

Infant formula milk can also be used during the first year of life.

Whole, pasteurised cows' milk can be given as a main drink after the age of 1 year. It does not contain the right balance of nutrients for infants and is particularly low in iron.

Bottle-fed infants of families in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseekers' Allowance are eligible to receive certain brands of infant formula free of charge under the Welfare Food Scheme. Families receiving Family Credit can purchase infant formula at a reduced price for bottle-fed infants (more details of this Scheme are available – see page 12).
Weaning

Up to the age of 4 months, an infant’s system can only cope with breast milk or formula milk which provides all the food and drink they need. So it’s best to advise that solids and non-milk drinks are not started before 4 months.

At 4 months, if a baby seems ready for it, a start can be made with spoonfuls of baby rice, mashed potato or puréed vegetables, such as carrots, peas or parsnips. When they’re used to the spoon, an infant can be introduced to lots of tastes, flavours and colours like purées of meat, pulses (beans, lentils), a wider variety of vegetables and fruit such as apple, banana and pear. By 6 months all infants should have started on some solid food.

At about 6 months encourage experimentation with food that has soft lumps, or is mashed. Nuts should not be given as an infant may choke (and see page 19 ‘Food allergies in young children’).

From about 9 months minced or finely chopped food will ensure that an infant gets used to lots of different textures so that they learn to chew.

By about 12 months they should be getting a good mixed diet with about 3 meals and 2-3 healthy snacks in between, each day. A variety of different foods helps to provide a balanced diet with all the nutrients in the right amounts for health.

Handy hints\(^{b}\) to pass on...

• Be patient and stay relaxed.
• Make plenty of time for feeding.
• Make allowance for mess by using bibs that catch food and by spreading newspaper on the floor if necessary.

• Remember the messy phase does not last forever. It’s worth the effort not to make too much fuss if it means that they experiment with all the foods they are given.
• Offer small quantities of new foods with more familiar ones.
• Don’t leave infants or young children on their own while they’re eating, in case they choke.
• It may help to feed them with the rest of the family. If they see other people enjoying food, they might be readier to eat their own. But there’s no hard and fast rule. If they seem happier to learn when they can be given undivided attention at a quiet time, then that’s fine too.

\(^{b}\) Based on common sense

When giving an infant solid food, like cereal, it should be given from a spoon and not mixed into their milk or other drink in the bottle. Otherwise they may choke. Also, they won’t learn about other textures and how to chew, or to handle foods with their fingers or with cutlery as soon as they should.

From 6 months they should be encouraged to drink from a cup and preferably not given a bottle after 12 months.

Preparing foods

Solid foods for weaning can be home-made, bought, or a mixture of each. It depends which is most convenient.

Preparing food at home enables control over what it contains and is often cheaper.

Home-made weaning foods should not have any salt added. It’s also best not to add sugar unless a small
amount is needed for palatability, for example when a home-made fruit purée tastes too sharp.

When introducing foods such as chicken, meat, fish and eggs a little food can be removed from whatever is being prepared for the family. This separate portion can then be puréed, mashed or minced without salt.

Puréeing or blending up more food than is needed and freezing the rest in individual portion sizes in either the compartments of an ice-cube tray or small pots with lids is convenient and saves time. Then a portion can simply be removed from the freezer as needed, defrosted, reheated thoroughly and cooled. Once an infant starts eating with the rest of the family they can still be served their own portion of food for as long as they need softer food than everyone else.

Remember to advise:
No added salt
Preferably sugar only to make sour foods palatable

Many people choose to use manufactured weaning foods. These can be good sources of iron and vitamin C, which are added to them. However, there are some points that might be born in mind when using bought weaning foods:

• it’s better not to use manufactured weaning foods exclusively, but to mix them with some fresh ingredients e.g. apple, banana, or recipe dishes;

• choose a mixed diet, not just desserts;

• choose products marked low in salt and sugar (look at the nutrition label); and

• read the instructions on the packet carefully concerning the reconstitution of dried baby foods, how much liquid and whether milk or water etc.

A list of hints on preparing, cooking and storing food hygienically is given on page 18.

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**Fussy eaters**

If an infant or young child develops fussy or faddy eating habits:

**Handy hints** to pass on...

• Simply clear away the food without saying anything and don’t keep offering alternatives.

• Don’t pile up their plate too much. It’s better to put a small amount on a big plate and praise them for clearing it up. Then try again slowly to increase the amount given each day.

• It’s better not to offer foods as rewards. Saying they can’t have pudding until they’ve eaten all their vegetables may turn them off vegetables for good.

• Children who eat snacks all the time in between meals can’t be expected to be hungry at mealtimes!

*Based on common sense

From the first time an infant is given solid food the experience should be an enjoyable one — for both parents and child. Enjoyment and appreciation of food helps to form the basis for healthy, balanced eating habits which continue throughout life.
Growing and getting active

The importance of enough calories

Like everyone else children need energy (calories) from their food as well as nutrients like protein, fat, carbohydrate (starch and sugar), vitamins and minerals to make sure the body works properly and repairs itself. Young children grow very quickly and are usually very active and they need plenty of calories and nutrients for this too.

Which foods do they need?

These are the 4 main groups of foods for an infant and young child:

- **Milk and dairy foods**, provide calories, protein, vitamins and minerals.

- **Meat, fish and alternatives** (like eggs and beans, peas, lentils etc.) are rich in nutrients like protein, vitamins and minerals.

- **Bread and other cereals and potatoes**. This group of starchy foods also includes rice, pasta, breakfast cereals, yams and sweet potatoes. They provide calories, vitamins and minerals, and fibre.

- **Fruit and vegetables** have vitamin C, other protective vitamins and minerals and fibre.

Children under 2 have small capacities and can’t eat big amounts of food at one sitting. So until they are 2 their meals and snacks should be based on foods that pack lots of calories and nutrients into a small quantity (nutrient dense foods). These are full fat versions of milk and dairy foods, and meat or eggs. They should be accompanied by fruit and vegetables and starchy foods.

Some people think that young children, like adults, should not eat too much fat, but it is much more important to make sure they get enough calories and a variety of foods than to worry about fat, especially when they are less than 2 years old.

There is no need to worry about too much fat for children under 2.

What is important is to make sure that they get enough calories.

Fat has more than twice the calories of protein or carbohydrate so foods containing fat can provide lots of calories in a small quantity.

Some people also think that high fibre foods like wholemeal pasta and brown rice are beneficial, but the stomach capacities of young children are too limited for the bulky meals that contain a lot of fibre. The absorption of essential minerals like calcium and iron can also be reduced by too much fibre.

Once a child is 2 years old they can change gradually over the next few years on to a diet that is more like that of an adult so that by the time they are about 5 they are eating a good family diet. This is more bulky as it is based on lots of starchy foods with plenty of fruit and vegetables, accompanied by a variety of foods – particularly the lower fat versions from the milk and dairy and meat, fish and alternatives groups. It should not contain too much fat.
especially saturated fat – the type that is found in butter and hard fat spreads, cheeses, fatty meat and meat products, and biscuits, pastry and cakes.

**Variety is the spice of life**

If a child is always eating the same foods, or filling up on things that have mostly calories and not much else (like some savoury snacks, confectionery and soft drinks) they won’t obtain the nutrients they need to be active and to grow. A selection each day of foods from the groups mentioned above will provide all the calories and nutrients they need.

Not everyone eats the same kind of diet. It’s possible to provide a child with a healthy balanced diet that fits the family’s lifestyle. The following pages provide suggestions of how this can be achieved with points to emphasise picked out in boxes.

**Milk and dairy foods**

Even after infants are eating more of a mixture of different foods, it’s really important that they continue to be given plenty of milk to drink.

Milk and dairy products contain calcium which is needed for strong bones and teeth. (Other sources of calcium are shown in a ready reference on page 13.)

Infants in their first year need breast milk or about 500ml (approximately 1 pint) of formula milk each day, as a main drink.

Cows', sheep's or goats' milks are not suitable as the main drinks for an infant because these milks don't provide enough iron for their needs.

Cows' milk can be given to infants in small quantities for mixing in with custard, other milk puddings or on their breakfast cereal. Formula milk may be more convenient for this especially if the rest of the family is having semi-skimmed or skimmed milk. Even if bottle feeding finishes and an infant moves to a cup, formula milk can be made up, stored in the fridge and used in the same way as cows’ milk.

When cows' milk is started after 12 months, it should be whole milk until a child is at least 2 years old, as otherwise they may not get enough calories for their needs.

After the age of 2, semi-skimmed milk can be introduced gradually as a main drink as long as a young child is eating well and getting plenty of calories and nutrients from a varied diet.

Fully skimmed milk is not suitable as a main drink for a young child until they’re 5 years old as it does not contain enough calories or vitamins.