



Irish Infant and Toddler Dietary Survey

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Against a background of rising concerns about the dietary habits of Irish children and adults and the impact our diet is having on the nation's health, Cow and Gate commissioned a dietary survey of 250 Irish infants and toddlers up to 36 months of age. The survey was conducted by over a 4 day period in the last 18 months using food diaries completed by their mothers.

An attitudinal survey of over 700 Irish mothers was conducted simultaneously investigating the concerns and challenges of infant and toddler feeding.

Both surveys were part of a Global usage and attitude survey conducted amongst 23,000 mothers and 11,000 infant or toddlers across 26 countries, by Synovate, a leading independent market research company**. The findings below focus on the toddlers food diaries.

Key findings

Evaluation of the food diaries provides some reassurance about the weaning diets of most of the Irish babies under 12 months, although the limited variety of fruits and veg mentioned suggests that mothers may be missing an opportunity to 'train' their babies' palates when they are at their most adaptable.

The main areas of concern emerged from around 1 year of age. Compared with the recommended food pyramid for young children from 1 – 3 years*, less than a quarter of toddlers had diets that were broadly in line with recommendations. However, in general, key features of Irish toddler's diets were as follows:

- High proportions of adult or 'kiddy' targeted processed food products were eaten generally (eg. sausages, burgers, pizza, chips, crisps) and certainly at levels above what could be considered healthy, giving rise to excessively high intakes of salt and saturated fat. 31% of 13 month olds had at least one of these foods every day, with this figure rising to 75% by the age of 2 ½ years. Over 1/3 of all meats /fish eaten by toddlers surveyed was processed.
- Fruit and vegetable intakes were generally well below levels currently recommended by experts, with just 1 in 8 (12%) having 4 small servings per day of which a portion of fruit juice counts as one serving, whilst 9% ate no fruit and 7% no vegetables throughout the 4 days surveyed. If baked beans and juice were excluded, the average number of fruit and veg servings was just 1.6 per day. Another key finding was the toddlers had very little variety – apples and bananas were by far the most commonly mentioned fruit, and carrots and baked beans the most common vegetable.
- A quarter of toddlers consumed excessive amounts of cows milk (ie between 600 and 1litre daily), a level associated with an increased risk of iron deficiency, which previous studies have shown to have a high prevalence amongst Irish toddlers. Intakes of cow's milk at these levels resulted in protein intakes of up to 280% above the recommended amount for toddlers, reaching levels that have been shown to be associated with an increased risk of obesity later.
- By contrast, a small but significant group (11%) of toddlers were drinking fruit juices or squashes of 500ml or more - well in excess of what is recommended, typically alongside low intakes of milk but in many cases alongside high intakes of other sugary foods.



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Discussion :

It is clear from the food diaries and the responses of mothers to the attitudinal survey that feeding toddlers a diet that provides all the important nutrients in the right amounts, without giving them excessive intakes of sugars, salt or saturated fat, can be a major challenge for parents.

Toddlers become more finicky or 'neophobic' from around 18mths of age, making them more likely to reject many foods, particularly vegetables and making it particularly challenging for parents to get their toddlers to eat well. This may also go some way to explaining the over-reliance on cow's milk to make up for what parents may worry is an inadequate food intake, failing to realise that intakes at these levels are likely to displace other important iron-rich foods, whilst contributing to high or excessive intakes of protein, sodium and saturated fat. Whilst processed convenience products like sausages, burgers and chips can appear to be ideally suited to little fingers, parents may fail to appreciate the fact that these products may have as much as half of what would be considered healthy for a toddlers daily intake of salt.

Conclusions:

Over 2 /3 of the mothers surveyed expressed concern about one or more aspects of their child's diet and are aware that good nutrition is particularly important for toddlers. However, roughly the same number say that they find conflicting messages confusing, so they rely on their own judgement in the end. This suggests that mothers need far more practical guidance and support in dealing with challenging feeding behaviour typical of toddlers if we are going to address the dietary shortcomings of our youngest citizens.

Footnotes:

Dietary guidelines:

Diets of toddlers from 12 – 36 months were evaluated on the basis of the number of servings of foods from each of the key food groups, and the dietary choices within food groups, using the Toddler food pyramid issued by the Department of Health, 2004, as a guide.

*Current expert guidelines on fruit and veg intake for toddlers are generally to give toddlers 4 or more small servings of a variety of fruit and veg, where one small glass of fruit juice counts as a maximum of one fruit portion.

About Synovate:

Synovate is a global market research company, operating across 6 continents, 52 countries and 24 time zones. One of their areas of expertise includes the design and analysis of global consumer usage and attitudes studies.