

Feeding the 21st Century Toddler

Why dietary advice for parents needs to take into account toddler development

Dietary information needs to take into account the age, nutritional and developmental needs of toddlers to help parents of young children deal with the difficulties of feeding their families healthily in the 21st century.

The Infant & Toddler Forum (I&TF) has developed an educational programme that addresses toddler nutrition in the context of modern-day nutritional issues such as the rising levels of obesity, fast food culture, lower activity levels and increasingly high pressure lifestyles.

'Feeding the 21st Century Toddler' will offer clear, accessible and realistic guidance on healthy eating during the toddler years. By focussing on the interface between parents, healthcare professionals (HCPs) and others concerned with the care of toddlers, the programme will promote the early intervention that is most likely to prevent bad eating habits that can lead to life-long health problems.

The I&TF has built its reputation on producing clear and practical nutritional guidance for health and childcare professionals. This will continue in the 2009 programme through the following initiatives:

- Three new I&TF **Factsheets**, including '*How to choose convenience foods*' and '*Understanding food labels*'
- An **interactive dietary assessment tool** for toddlers that will be part of the forthcoming 'Open Book on Toddler Nutrition'
- The launch of a new report '**Food and Nutrition for the Under Threes**' to roll out the Little People's Plates initiative [see separate press release] and a parliamentary **briefing meeting at Westminster** launching a call to action to acknowledge and address toddlers specific nutritional needs
- Expansion of the I&TF **website** for use with **parents' area**
- **Back to basics – Feeding the 21st Century Toddler** - A day workshop tailored to the basics of toddler nutrition - Tuesday 17th November.

Register now at www.infantandtoddlerforum.org to receive updates as soon as resources are released and to access the Forum's free educational materials.

Redefining healthy eating

The programme comes at a time when many parents and carers of young children say they are confused about the best way to feed their children, and when much of the information produced for HCPs ignores the ages from one to three.

The recent Annual Health Survey for England revealed that many people remain confused about what is healthy eating and what isn't. More than 70 per cent of those asked felt they would benefit from making changes to their diet¹.

And, if parents themselves aren't eating healthily, what hope is there for their children?

Age-specific nutrition

One of children's key developmental stages is the point at which they begin to share their family's food. It is important to assess the family's diet to identify whether it provides a good foundation on which to build the child's nutrition intake. If the family's diet is based around fast food and convenience meals it raises serious concerns about toddlers' nutrient intakes, increasing their risk of nutritional inadequacies and obesity.

The toddler years are critical. A recent study revealed that most excessive weight gain in children happens in the pre-school years. Children who are obese before they start school are likely to remain that way until at least puberty. 90 per cent of the excess weight in obese girls and 70 per cent in boys is gained before these children begin primary school. It is important that eating, diet and lifestyle in this early period does not lead to obesity, but prevents it.

'We know that recognising and correcting for poor diet in these early pre-school years will have lasting benefits that improve an individual's chances of becoming a healthy child and adult' said Prof Atul Singhal, honorary consultant paediatrician and Chair of the Infant & Toddler Forum. 'The I&TF believes focusing on health and nutrition in the early years will improve public health in the years to come by giving all children the best start in life.'

Positive action

Dipti Aistrop, member of the I&TF, stressed that health visitors are key professionals who advise parents on how to feed their children.

'We need information and resources to help young families make more informed choices about the right foods for their toddler,' she said. 'The I&TF factsheets and training aids provide excellent practical resources that allow child and healthcare professionals to help parents understand the basic principles of healthy eating and learn good dietary habits that may last them a lifetime.'

For further information about the Forum and its educational initiatives visit www.infantandtoddlerforum.org or contact the secretariat on 020 8971 0022

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If you would like to interview any of the Forum members or require further press information, please contact:

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Notes to editors:

About the Forum

- A goal of the Forum is to improve the access of healthcare professionals to reliable, evidence-based nutritional information relevant to their practice, which will equip them to advise and support the parents of infants and young children
- The Forum is supported by an educational grant from the Infant Nutrition division of Nutricia. The views and outputs of the group, however, remain independent of Nutricia and its commercial interests.

About Obesity

- A fifth of two to five year olds are obese, while a further 14 per cent are overweight.ⁱⁱ If current trends continue, by 2050 about 25 per cent of children in the UK will be clinically obeseⁱⁱⁱ
- Establishing good feeding patterns in early years could reduce the risk of developing obesity and other life threatening complications such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and high blood pressure^{iv}
- Almost one in four of the children measured at reception age as part of the National Child Measurement Programme was already either overweight or obese.^v

Our changing lifestyle in the 21st Century

- Compared to 1950s less energy comes from bread and potatoes....today's toddlers fill up on fats and sugars
- There has been a massive change in our way of life - the fact that 70 per cent of mothers now work, compared with around a quarter 25 years ago. (A Good Childhood Report, Feb 2009: http://www.childrengood.org.uk/resources/documents/good%20childhood/Good_Childhood_Inquiry_launch_report_5830_full.pdf)
- Physical activity decreasing
- Time spent preparing foods
 - Preparation time down from an hour in 1983 to 13 minutes today
 - Increase in purchases of ready meals (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmhealth/23/2305.htm#n91>)
 - Amount of ingredients used in the evening meal has halved since 1950. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2265774/A-home-cooked-meal-in-2008-contains-half-the-ingredients-of-a-1950s-dinner.html>)

ⁱ Annual Health Survey for England – Summary Report 2007. p9 (<http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles-related-surveys/health-survey-for-england/health-survey-for-england-2007:-healthy-lifestyles:-knowledge-attitudes-and-behaviour-%5Bns%5D>).

ⁱⁱ Cross Government Obesity Unit. Department of Health and Department for Children, Schools and Families. Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A cross-government strategy for England. London: COI, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Health. Foresight Report: Tackling Obesity: Future Choices. Summary of Key Messages. 2007.

^{iv} Lorch S, Sharkey, A. Myocardial Velocity, Strain, and Strain Rate Abnormalities in Healthy Obese Children. J Cardiometab Syndr. 2007 Winter;2(1):30-34.

^v National Child Measurement Programme: 2006/07 school year headline results. February 2008.