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Weaning onto solid foods in Ireland: some of the challenges

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A supportive environment is a key determinant of healthy behaviours, including best infant feeding practice. Weaning, defined as the transition from milk to solid foods during the first year of life, is a critical phase during which a variety of staples from the main food groups are introduced. In particular, introducing dietary sources of haem Fe from 6 months of age is essential to avoid the adverse effects of Fe deficiency. Foods rich in added fat, sugar or salt should be avoided. A previous study of Dublin-based infants found that inappropriate weaning practices were relatively common at 6 months of age⁽¹⁾. The present study examined the presence of haem Fe-containing foods in infant diets before 1 year of age and the commercial baby food environment in Ireland.

Mothers with an infant less than 30 months of age were surveyed in shopping centres in Ireland. A standardised questionnaire obtained information on: the inclusion of recommended red meats beef, pork and lamb; mothers' knowledge of weaning and the importance of Fe, and; their use of commercial baby foods. A scan of commercial baby foods available in Ireland was conducted, and all products identified were assessed under European Union Commission Directive 2006/125/EC.

Of the total group (n 195), 82% (n 159) of mothers reported wanting more information on weaning, and almost a third (29%, n 57) named the public health nurse as the most useful source of information on weaning. A quarter (n 24) of infants aged over 12 months (n 97) did not receive any of the recommended red meats before one year of age. Over two-thirds of mothers (69%, n 135) were unaware of the age at which Fe is important in an infant's diet. Mothers aware of the correct age reported introducing red meats significantly earlier (7.1 ± 1.5 months *v.* 8.4 ± 2.5 months, $P = 0.006$). More than two-thirds (68%, n 113) of mothers said they used commercial baby foods. All commercial baby foods identified in the scan ($n = 448$) complied with relevant legislation. However, 15% of products (n 69) did not emulate best practice in infant feeding. This may be a concern as 33% (n 62) of mothers reported using types of commercial baby foods available to give them ideas for homemade meals.

Examples of commercial baby foods at variance with best practice infant feeding (n 69)

Banoffi pie	Suitable from 4 months	Contains added sugar and fat
Chocolate pudding	Suitable from 4 months	Contains added sugar and fat
Strawberry cheesecake	Suitable from 4 months	Contains added sugar and fat
Beef gravy	Suitable from 4 months	Contains added salt
Sausage pasta bake	Suitable from 4 months	Contains processed salty meat
Tomato, beans and bacon	Suitable from 4 months	Contains processed salty meat

This study has identified issues of concern relevant to infant feeding in Ireland. The knowledge deficit among mothers on infant feeding and their desire for guidance on weaning must be addressed. This should focus on both the timely introduction of Fe-containing foods and the provision of healthy food choices to provide an adequate, though not excessive, nutrient intake. While commercial infant foods are safe and convenient meal options for infants, the inclusion of unsuitable foods conveys inappropriate messages on best practice in infant feeding. This study indicates a need for more focus on the promotion of best practice in infant feeding for obesity and chronic disease prevention.

1. Tarrant RC, Younger KM, Sheridan-Pereira M *et al.* (2010) Factors observed with weaning practices in term infants: a prospective observational study in Ireland. *Br J Nutr.* **104**, 1544–1554.