

# Does mom know when enough is enough?

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As the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States continues, researchers are examining whether early parent and child behaviors contribute to the problem. A study from the Department of Nutritional Sciences, Rutgers University, published in the May/June 2009 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* reports that mothers who miss signs of satiety in their infants tend to overfeed them, leading to excess weight gains during the 6 month to 1 year period.

Ninety-six low-income black and Hispanic mothers, who chose to formula feed exclusively, were enrolled in the study. Data was collected during an initial interview and three home visits at 3, 6, and 12 months. During the home visits, feedings were observed, the mothers were interviewed, and the child's weight was measured. Feeding diaries were also checked for omissions or clarifications.

A number of characteristics that predicted infant [weight gain](#) from birth to 3 months were included in the analysis. These were birth weight, gender, race/ethnicity, maternal age, education, country of origin, [body mass index](#) (BMI) before pregnancy, and weight gain during pregnancy. For the 3 to 6 month period, birth weight, maternal BMI, infant weight gain from birth to 3 months, infant length gain from birth to 3 months, the estimated number of feeds per day, the month that solid food was introduced, and the mothers' sensitivity to the infants' signals at 3 months were included. And, finally, for the 6 to 12 month period, [birth weight](#), maternal BMI, infant weight gain from 3 to 6 months, infant length gain from 3 to 6 months, maternal sensitivity to infant signals at 6 months, and the estimated number of feeds/day at 6 months were entered as the

independent variables.

None of these variables served to predict infant weight gain over the first 3 months, or similarly, from 3 to 6 months. However, the number of feeds per day at 6 months approached significance in predicting weight gain from 6 to 12 months, and maternal sensitivity to the infants' signals reached predictive significance, but in a negative direction—indicating that mothers who were less sensitive to satiety cues had infants who gained more weight.

Writing in the article, John Worobey, PhD; Maria Islas Lopez, MA; and Daniel J. Hoffman, PhD, state, "More frequent feedings, particularly with formula, are an easy culprit on which to assign blame. But maternal sensitivity to the infant's feeding state, as reflected by the Feeding Scale scores, suggests that an unwillingness to slow the pace of feeding or terminate the feeding when the infant shows satiation cues may be overriding the infant's ability to self-regulate its intake."

However, the researchers warn that, "To use this knowledge to better inform low-income/educated mothers, indeed, mothers of any background who have settled on a feeding method, could pose a daunting challenge. Feeding an infant is a primal behavior, and to suggest to a new mother that she is feeding her infant too often, too much, or worse yet, is not very good at reading her infant's signals, would require an extremely skilled nurse or social worker. Giving counsel after watching a mother feed her infant might be seen as threatening, or at the very least meddling, and just pointing it out could be construed as an accusation of 'poor mothering.'"

More information: The article is "Maternal Behavior and Infant Weight Gain in the First Year" by John Worobey, PhD; Maria Islas Lopez, MA; and Daniel J. Hoffman, PhD. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 41, Issue 3, (May/June 2009) published

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