

# 'Often and early' gives children a taste for vegetables

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Credit: Mary LaFrance/public domain

Exposing infants to a new vegetable early in life encourages them to eat more of it compared to offering novel vegetables to older children, new research from the University of Leeds suggests.

The researchers, led by Professor Marion Hetherington in the Institute of

Psychological Sciences, also found that even fussy eaters are able to eat a bit more of a new vegetable each time they are offered it.

The research, involving babies and [children](#) from the UK, France and Denmark, also dispelled the popular myth that vegetable tastes need to be masked or given by stealth in order for children to eat them.

Professor Hetherington said: "For parents who wish to encourage healthy eating in their children, our research offers some valuable guidance.

"If you want to encourage your children to eat vegetables, make sure you start early and often. Even if your child is fussy or does not like veggies, our study shows that 5-10 exposures will do the trick."

In the study, which was funded by the EU, the research team gave artichoke puree to 332 children from three countries aged from weaning age to 38 months. During the experiment each child was given between five and 10 servings of at least 100g of the artichoke puree in one of three versions: basic; sweetened, with added sugar; or added energy, where [vegetable oil](#) was mixed into the puree.

There was also little difference in the amounts eaten over time between those who were fed basic puree and those who ate the sweetened puree, which suggests that making vegetables sweeter does not make a significant difference to the amount children eat.

Younger children consumed more artichoke than [older children](#). This is because after 24 months children become reluctant to try new things and start to reject foods – even those they previously liked. Among the children, four distinct groups emerged. Most children (40%) were "learners" who increased intake over time. Of the group, 21% consumed more than 75% of what was offered each time and they were called "plate-clearers". Those who ate less than 10g even by the fifth helping

were classified as "non-eaters", amounting to 16% of the cohort, and the remainder were classified as "others" (23%) since their pattern of intake varied over time. Non-eaters, who tended to be older pre-school children, were the most fussy, the research found.

Globe artichoke was chosen as the sample [vegetable](#) because, as part of the research, parents were surveyed and artichoke was one of the least-offered vegetables. NHS guidelines are to start weaning children onto solid foods at six months.

The research has been published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

**More information:** "Learning to Eat Vegetables in Early Life: The Role of Timing, Age and Individual Eating Traits", *PLOS ONE*, 2014.

Provided by University of Leeds

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