

Study reveals toddlers' diets at risk of iron deficiency

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QUT researcher Rebecca Byrne

Most toddlers are at risk of not getting enough iron in their diets, a QUT nutritionist has warned.

In a study led by QUT's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, researcher Rebecca Byrne said [iron deficiency anaemia](#) remained an issue for some toddlers.

Mrs Byrne said the toddler age could be characterised by what parents perceived as fussy eating and a fear of trying unfamiliar food.

"It's sometimes a stressful time for parents but the key is to just relax," she said. "Food refusal is normal and a poker face is needed.

"It's better for smaller, nutritional-based food to be offered at frequent intervals.

"It's a new phase of childhood development when growth naturally slows and neophobia can kick in so remain neutral and continue to offer new food."

QUT's School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences involved more than 550 children aged 12 to 16 months and investigated their diets over a 24-hour period.

She said the study provided the first insight into the dietary habits of Australian toddlers.

"Food and beverages were classified into core groups including: fruit, vegetables, cereals, meat, dairy, fats and oils, formula and discretionary items.

"Dairy and cereal were the most commonly consumed food groups and the highest contributor to a child's daily energy intake."

- 97% ate breakfast cereal, whole wheat biscuit, white and wholemeal bread
- 96% ate dairy, such as cow's milk and cheddar cheese
- 91% ate discretionary items such as cakes, pastries, plain sweet biscuits, crisps and vegemite
- 87% ate fruit such as bananas, dried sultanas, strawberries and seedless green grapes
- 78% ate meat and alternatives
- 77% ate vegetables such as carrots, potatoes and broccoli

- 32% drank formula either infant, follow-on or toddler milk

The results showed the quality of dietary intake of children was highly variable.

Mrs Byrne said 22 per cent of children consumed no meat and almost half of those that did ate less than 30 grams.

"Only 56 per cent consumed enough fruit, vegetables, cereals, meat and dairy in a 24 hour period, while 13 per cent only ate foods from three or fewer core food groups," she said.

"Toddlers had a more diverse diet when they decreased their formula intake."

Mrs Byrne also warned too much reliance on formula and milk led to toddlers feeling full and unlikely to try new foods.

"It's important to follow a child's hunger cues so they're in touch with their bodies as it teaches them to feel hungry," she said.

"Health professionals know little about which foods parents are offering and what children are actually eating at the critical one-to-two years of age.

"It's an important developmental age when children make the transition from a milk-based diet in infancy to a mixed diet of family meals.

"The results also showed a quarter of children were still breastfed beyond 12 months of age."

The project was a part of QUT's obesity prevention study, NOURISH, which monitored nearly 700 mothers and their [children](#) until aged five.

The article has been published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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