

How Singaporean infants of different backgrounds are introduced to food

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The timing and approach by which infants are introduced to solid food varies according to their cultural background, a Singaporean study suggests. A*STAR Researcher Toh Jia Ying says health practitioners should be aware of these differences when offering advice to parents about the transition to solid food.

These insights come from a large scale ongoing study of mothers and infants called 'Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes (GUSTO)', a collaboration between Singapore's National University Health System (NUHS), KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and the A*STAR Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences. The large cohort of mothers and infants being followed in the GUSTO study allowed close monitoring of how infants of Chinese, Malay or Indian ethnicity were weaned off of breast milk or formula and introduced to food.

The study showed greater independent self-feeding by Malay infants, perhaps reflecting a cultural propensity for eating with hands. In the Chinese group, there was a wider use of probiotics. Babies of Indian ethnicity were more likely to be given dietary supplements, have oil and seasonings added to their foods, and consume more sweetened drinks from the bottle. In general, most infants had some exposure to sweetened drinks by 12 months of age, but Toh notes that it is not advisable to feed infants sweetened beverages at a young age.

Toh says that a key finding across all ethnic groups was that a significant

number of infants—a third of the cohort—were still given blended food at 12 months. The team recommends that by then, children should be given solid foods in bite-sized pieces, as this encourages children to chew, promoting the development of jaw muscles.

"The research indicates that certain cultural traditions are still widely practiced in modern cosmopolitan Singapore," says Toh. These cultural differences in infant feeding practices have not been well studied in the past, a gap that the multi-ethnic GUSTO study is particularly well-placed to address. Toh says that findings from the study will assist healthcare professionals in forming everyday guidance for parents and caregivers through the research team's links with Singapore's Health Promotion Board and Ministry of Health.

More information: Jia Toh et al. Infant Feeding Practices in a Multi-Ethnic Asian Cohort: The GUSTO Study, *Nutrients* (2016). [DOI: 10.3390/nu8050293](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu8050293)

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