

Can breast milk feed a love of vegetables?

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(HealthDay)—Want your preschooler to eat veggies without a fuss? Try eating veggies while you're breast-feeding.

That's the message from a new study of lactating mothers and their breast-fed babies. The study found that those infants who took in veggie-flavored breast-milk were less likely to turn away from similar-tasting cereal when they graduated to more solid food.

"Every baby's sensory experience is unique, but the flavor of their first food, beginning in utero, is dependent on what mom is eating," said Julie Mennella. She is a biopsychologist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, and led the study.

"The way I see it is: Mother's milk is the ultimate in precision medicine," Mennella said.

When an expectant mother eats vegetables, they flavor her amniotic fluid—and later, her breast-milk—and those flavors get passed along to her baby. As a result, the researchers said, if the baby learns early how veggies taste, he or she will be less apt to squawk when offered that first spoonful.

That's a boon for parents and for the nation's health. One in four U.S. toddlers doesn't eat even one vegetable a day, the study authors noted. Like many of their moms and other adults, kids are more likely to choose sweet and salty snacks and sugary drinks, which contribute to obesity and chronic disease.

"Everybody wants to get baby off to a good start," Mennella said, adding the first weeks of life are prime time for babies and mothers alike to develop a taste for healthy food.

For her study, Mennella randomly assigned 97 breast-feeding mothers to one of five groups.

For a month, three groups drank a half-cup of carrot, celery, beet or

vegetable juice before nursing. One group began when babies were two weeks old, another at 1-1/2 months of age and the third at 2-1/2 months.

A fourth group of moms drank juice for three months, starting when their babies were two weeks old. A fifth group—the "control" group—did not use juice.

As solid foods were added to the diet, moms were videotaped offering plain cereal, carrot-flavored or broccoli-flavored cereals to their babies. The researchers watched for signs of disgust from the babies—wrinkled noses, curled lips, frowns or more emphatic slaps at the spoon.

The takeaway: Babies who'd been exposed to vegetable flavors in breast-milk preferred carrot-flavored cereal over plain cereal or cereal with the unfamiliar taste of broccoli. Only 8 percent rejected all of the foods, the findings showed.

"They learn through repeated exposure," said Mennella. "And the timing is important."

Babies whose exposure began at 2 weeks of age ate more of the carrot-flavored cereal—and gobbled it up faster—than those whose moms started juicing later or who drank water instead. And it took only a month to get the infants used to the taste, the study authors noted.

Mennella said that might be because babies nurse more often during those first weeks, or there may be time periods when their tastes are more easily shaped.

And it's never too late to train your palate. Though eight out of 10 mothers still weren't eating recommended amounts of vegetables when the study ended, many had grown to like the new flavors, too.

That makes it more likely they'll continue serving healthy foods as the child grows, Mennella said.

"Through these [flavor](#) changes, the mother is teaching the baby that these foods are safe, these foods are what I eat and these foods are available," she said. "If you change the mother's diet and she starts liking these foods, you change the whole family."

Jennifer McDaniel, a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, agreed.

Kids' food preferences are strongly influenced by what their parents eat, she said. "If a mother's diet has variety, it promotes kids to be more accepting and open to new flavors, because somewhere on the road, they've had exposure," she explained.

Though McDaniel said other studies have shown breast-fed [babies](#) are less likely to become finicky about food, she said mothers who are unable to breast-feed or don't choose to shouldn't beat themselves up.

Just be sure you're offering your family healthy—and varied—foods, she said. Let kids experience not just different flavors, but different textures.

And don't give up, McDaniel advised. It might take 10 to 20 tries for a child to decide whether he or she likes a [food](#).

"Our role as parents is to be that good role model," McDaniel said. "Sometimes you just have to relax a little bit and keep doing what you need to be doing: offering lots of different foods and exposing it to them very frequently. In the end, you'll most likely end up having children who are not so picky, who have healthy patterns."

The study was published in the July issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

More information: Julie Mennella, Ph.D., M.S., member, Monell Chemical Senses Center, Philadelphia; Jennifer McDaniel, B.S., owner/founder, McDaniel Nutrition Therapy, Clayton, Mo., and spokeswoman, American Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics; July 2017, *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*

The U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion has [tips on breast-feeding](#).

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