

New link between childhood obesity and early infant feeding

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New research from Western Sydney University suggests that infants in South Western Sydney introduced to formula and solid foods within the first four months, could be twice as likely to suffer from childhood

obesity.

The study, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, tracked the health and weight of 346 infants from the area over a ten-year period. Lead researcher of the study, Dr. Haider Mannan from the Translational Health Research Institute (THRI) and School of Medicine says that while there is World Health Organization recommendation against the early introduction of solid foods and formula to an infant's diet, it is often not practiced and so its prevalence is very widespread in South Western Sydney.

"South Western Sydney has the highest [childhood obesity](#) rate in Australia, our study found that the introduction of formula or solids within the first four months was also quite common in the region – with 82 per cent of [mothers](#) in the study noting that they introduced formula or solids to their [infants](#) within the first four months.

"What our study has shown is that, in terms of infant feeding patterns, the first four months of life poses the greatest risk for the development of obesity later in childhood.

"While acknowledging that some mothers can't continue breast feeding in the first four months for a number of medical or psychological reasons, the study points to the importance of discouraging early infant formula and solids feeding to ensure that mothers, and GPs, know the benefits.

"We recommend continued exclusive breastfeeding for 4–6 months and not over six months as it may result in mothers exclusively breastfeeding, for example, for 9 months which is not recommended based on latest research," says Dr. Mannan.

The study emphasises that education about the correct timing of solids

and formula introduction, combined with other programs encouraging [physical activity](#), will have a major impact on the childhood obesity rates of the region into the future.

"It may however still take several decades for these rates to get back to normal as past experience with regards to the effect of smoking rate reductions may indicate," says Dr. Mannan.

To reduce [childhood obesity](#) risk associated with early supplementation of infant feeding, Dr. Mannan suggests engaging in educational programs, such as the South West Sydney Local Health District's (SWSLHD) pilot program, known as the Chat Study. This study provides mothers who give birth at Liverpool and Campbelltown hospitals in southwest Sydney access to regular text messages or [phone calls](#) offering nutritional coaching to help with healthy development; including discouraging early introduction of supplementary and complementary foods.

Provided by Western Sydney University

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