

Summer Meeting, 4–6 July 2011, 70th Anniversary: From plough through practice to policy

Knowledge of the UK weaning guidelines influences the timing of the introduction of solid foods to infants

A. P. Moore, P. Milligan and L. M. Goff

Diabetes and Nutritional Sciences Division, School of Medicine, King's College London, Stamford Street, London SE1 9NH, UK

The Department of Health (DH) guidelines to wean infants on to solid foods about 6 months have been the subject of recent debate^(1,2). Although it is suggested that knowledge of these guidelines is high⁽³⁾, the most recent UK-wide study of weaning practice in 2005⁽⁴⁾ showed only 1% were waiting until 26 weeks to wean. The guidelines are the subject of a current Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition review⁽⁵⁾.

The objective of this study was to assess understanding of the weaning guidelines in a cross-sectional sample of UK parents and to investigate how this knowledge, together with other factors, may influence weaning timing. An on-line survey was carried out among 3607 UK parents, recruited from UK parenting web-sites. The survey consisted of twenty-one questions covering understanding of the guidelines, sources of weaning advice, ante-natal care and feeding choices. Ninety-nine percent of respondents were mothers.

Sixty-two percentage understood the guidelines to be to introduce solid foods about 6 months, 24% at 6 months (from 26 weeks), 7% 4–6 months, 6% 'when your baby showed signs of being ready' and 1% were not aware of any guidelines. Knowledge of the guidelines was associated with later weaning (independently of demographic factors) ($P < 0.001$) but did not ensure compliance as 80% ($n = 1220$) of mothers who weaned before 24 weeks and 65% ($n = 250$) who weaned before 17 weeks were aware of the guidelines. At least 70% across all demographic groups accurately understood the guidelines, however younger mothers ($P < 0.001$), those receiving benefits ($P < 0.001$), those only educated to sixteen ($P < 0.001$) and ethnic minority groups ($P < 0.001$) were less likely to be aware of the guidelines. ANOVA modelling recognised that those who finished formal education at sixteen, weaned later when they were aware of the guidelines ($P = 0.017$). Poor understanding of the current weaning guidelines was the most reliable predictor of weaning inappropriately early (before 17 weeks) ($P = 0.021$, OR 2.52 (1.15–5.52)) together with young maternal age ($P = 0.014$, OR 0.96 (0.93–0.99)). Other factors associated with earlier weaning included low educational attainment*, being a single parent**, weaning in response to the baby waking at night* or not being satisfied by milk* and being most influenced by advice from friends and family** or previous experience*. Later weaning was associated with being influenced by advice from health visitors** and the internet*, attending ante-natal classes**, exclusive breastfeeding 0–8 weeks* and being a first-time mother**. Following the baby-led weaning approach was the most reliable predictor of those weaning 26 weeks*. (* $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.05$).

The complexity of factors associated with weaning timing was apparent from our analysis. Despite this, accurate knowledge of the recommendation to wean about 6 months is associated with later weaning, particularly among first-time mothers and may compensate for a tendency to wean early among those of lower educational attainment. The popularity of baby-led weaning was highlighted and merits further investigation given the lack of current research on this method of weaning.

1. Fewtrell M, Wilson DC *et al.* (2011) *BMJ* 342.
2. European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) Panel on Dietetic Products NaA (2009) *EFSA J* 7, 1423–1461.
3. Department of Health (2010) Consumer insight summary. <http://www.dh.gov.uk>
4. Bolling K, Grant C *et al.* (2005) UK Infant Feeding Survey 2005. National Health Service.
5. Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (2010) SACN/SMCN/10/08.