

To investigate the awareness and recommendations of healthcare professionals of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland dietary guidelines for 1-5-year-olds

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The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) published the Scientific Recommendations for Food-Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs) for 1–5-Year-Olds in Ireland in 2020⁽¹⁾. These guidelines promote healthy eating habits and highlight the poor intakes of iron, vitamin D and Omega-3 in young children. The FSAI recommendations include consuming red meat 3 times per week, fish once per week, and including a vitamin D supplement in the diet of preschool children to help improve the poor intakes of these at-risk nutrients and promote healthy eating habits from a young age. The FBDGs also acknowledge the use of fortified full-fat milk, follow-up formula and young child formula (YCF), this is the first acknowledgement of the use YCF in an Irish scientific report⁽¹⁾. Normally, a child will have up to 15 health check-ups from birth to 5 years from a healthcare professional (HCP), such as Public Health Nurses (PHNs), Practice Nurses (PNs) or General Practitioners (GPs) therefore, providing various potential opportunities for HCPs to educate parents on the FSAI FBDGs⁽²⁾. The aim of this research is to investigate the awareness and recommendations of HCPs in Ireland of the FSAI FBDGs specifically in children aged 1-3. A 12-item questionnaire was distributed to HCPs through various avenues including the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute, Irish General Practise Nurses Educational Association, and through HCP dedicated social media pages. Questions regarding their awareness and use of the guidelines, their toddler patients, as well as their opinion of YCF were asked.

Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were performed using SPSS 27 to calculate percentages and frequencies. 151 HCPs were included in the analysis. 32% were dietitians, 65% were PHNs/PNs, and 3% were GPs. Across all HCPs, 61% had heard of the FBDGs, 39% had read the guidelines and over a quarter (27%) reported to use the FBDGs. 38% of all HCPs encounter toddlers with unhealthy diets or fussy eating habits, with dietitians seeing most of these toddlers (57%, n = 28). Within the sample of dietitians, 98% (n = 48) were aware of the FBDGs, 82% (n = 40) had read the guidelines and just under half (47%, n = 23) reported to use the FBDGs. The FBDGs recognise that YCF contributes to the intake of 3 key nutrients (iron, vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids) in 1–3-year-olds. In this study, approximately half (51%) of HCPs would recommend YCF. Toddler diets have a profound impact on life-long health⁽¹⁾; therefore, it is extremely important that there is clear and straightforward public health messaging surrounding toddler diets. This study highlights the need for more awareness and training on the FSAI FBDGs among HCPs so they in turn can advise parents and caregivers.

References

1. Food Safety Authority of Ireland (2020) *Scientific Committee Report. Scientific Recommendations for Food- Based Dietary Guidelines for 1 to 5-year-olds in Ireland*. [Available at: www.fsai.ie]
2. Health Service Executive (2018). *Why Your Child has Regular Health Checks*. [Available at: <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/babies-and-children/checks-milestones/health-checks/child-health-check-overview/>]