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An exploration of knowledge, attitudes and advice given by health professionals to parents about the introduction of solid foods to their infants

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It is widely believed that there are health implications from the introduction of inappropriate solid foods to infants^(1,2), including the possible risk of allergy and obesity. There is also concern about the age of introduction of these first foods. The Health Service Executive literature⁽³⁾ routinely given to parents suggests that solid foods should not be introduced before 4 months for formula-fed infants and, as in the WHO's recommendations⁽⁴⁾, 6 months for breast-fed infants. Emerging evidence suggests that babies in Dublin are given solid foods before the recommended age⁽⁵⁾, but there has been little investigation of the weaning advice provided by health professionals. The present study aimed to explore the knowledge, attitudes and advice practices about weaning amongst community health professionals, since they have routine parent interactions in the preweaning and early-weaning period.

A mixed-methods approach was used for the research, commencing with a multi-disciplinary focus group to guide and develop a questionnaire. Questionnaires were then distributed in a postal survey to general practitioners (GP; *n* 179), practice nurses (*n* 121), public health nurses (*n* 107) and dietitians (*n* 8) in north Dublin. Over 180 questionnaires were returned (47% response), and the findings indicated differing knowledge of official weaning recommendations and varied advice practices. It was found that 19% of practice nurse respondents and 7% of GP respondents did not acknowledge that they have a role in providing weaning advice to parents. Dietitians and public health nurses did acknowledge this role, rated highly their postgraduate training and demonstrated high confidence levels in providing weaning advice. Of the respondents 8% indicated that they never discuss weaning. The Table shows the age suggested by respondents to introduce specific foods; 21–24% of respondents indicated 16 weeks for rice, fruit and vegetables, which explains the high 'early' percentages. Small pockets of misinformation persist that might lead to inconsistent advice for parents.

	Age for coding (weeks)	Early (% respondents)	On time or later (% respondents)	No response (% respondents)
Wheat	>24	10	60	22
Rice	>17	34.5	41.5	16
Cow's milk	>52	16	60	16
Meat	>17	5	64	23
Poultry	>17	6	63	23
Fish	>24	32.5	39	20.5
Eggs	>24	25.5	46.5	20
Yoghurt	>24	38.5	33	20.5
Honey	>52	20	25	47
Fruit	>17	61.5	13	17.5
Vegetables	>17	59	14	19

The research findings highlight the need for multi-disciplinary communication, further nutrition training for professionals, improved dissemination of health information and integration of health promotional literature for parents.

1. Wilson AC, Forsyth JS, Greene SA *et al.* (1998) *Br Med J* **316**, 21–25.
2. Ong KK, Emmett PM, Noble S *et al.* (2006) *Pediatrics* **117**, 503–508.
3. Health Service Executive (2005) Caring for your baby: birth to six months old. <http://www.sehb.ie/search/publications/chisp/index.html>
4. World Health Organization (2001) *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding*. Geneva: WHO.
5. Tarrant RC (2005) Infant nutrition: are we meeting international recommendations? *Irish Med News*, Nov 1st, 42–43.