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An investigation into the parental attitudes and challenges faced when introducing solid foods to infants in Ireland

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The introduction of complementary foods, also known as 'weaning', refers to the process of introducing solid foods into an infant's diet, alongside breast milk or infant formula milk⁽¹⁾. According to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) guidelines, weaning should commence around 6 months of age, with no earlier or later than 17 or 26 weeks, respectively⁽²⁾. These guidelines provide evidence-based recommendations aimed at promoting optimal infant health, growth, and development⁽³⁾. The aim of this study was to gain an insight into parental attitudes towards weaning and the common challenges faced when introducing solids.

Data was collected using a 16-item questionnaire. Parents of infants aged 0–12 months were recruited through an online parenting club and descriptive statistics were performed using IBM SPSS (V29) to determine percentages.

Of the 215 participants, 64% (n = 137) had initiated solid food introduction to their infants, with the age of these infants ranging from 4–12 months. Of those, the majority (80%, n = 109) followed FSAI guidelines⁽²⁾, introducing new foods daily or every few days. The main factors guiding this decision were signs of readiness and developmental milestones, cited by 76% of respondents (n = 104). Among those who began weaning (n = 137), 70% reported a positive experience, though the majority (92%, n = 126) encountered challenges along the way. These included infant's refusal to eat (34%, n = 47), allergy concerns (41%, n = 56), and difficulty determining appropriate portion sizes (48%, n = 66). Our findings showed that 12% (n = 16) of infants aged 6–9 months and 2% (n = 3) of infants aged 10–12 months had not yet been introduced to meat, poultry, or fish. Additionally, 4% of parents (n = 6) waited until their infants were at least 9 months old to introduce these foods, despite guidelines recommending early exposure to iron-rich foods⁽²⁾.

Most parents with infants aged 0–6 months (64%, n = 78) had not started weaning. Among them, 26% (n = 20) felt very confident about beginning the process, while 25% (n = 19) lacked confidence in introducing solid foods to their infants.

Among all participants, information on weaning commonly came from family/friends (68%, n = 147), healthcare professionals (60%, n = 128), and social media (46%, n = 99). When asked about resources they would like access to, nearly two-thirds of parents (64%, n = 138) expressed interest in weaning recipe ideas. Additionally, 53% (n = 114) highlighted the need for guidelines on the appropriate amount of milk to give during weaning.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that while most parents appear compliant with the recommended timing of weaning, challenges still persist. Moreover, there is a notable reliance on various sources for weaning information, with a demand for resources like weaning recipes and milk quantity guidelines. These insights highlight the importance of tailored support and education to facilitate a positive weaning experience for both parents and infants.

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References

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