

## An investigation into the awareness and compliance of new food-based dietary guidelines for young children in Ireland

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The Food Safety Authority of Ireland recently published food-based dietary guidelines for 1–5-year-old children, highlighting that this age group were at risk of inadequate intakes of iron, vitamin D, EPA and DHA<sup>(1)</sup>. This formed the basis for new Department of Health, healthy eating guidelines for kids<sup>(2)</sup>.

The aim of this study was to investigate awareness of the new guidelines<sup>(1–2)</sup> among parents of children aged 1–3 years, and compliance to certain recommendations contributing to intakes of the at-risk nutrients iron, vitamin D, DHA and EPA. A 15-item questionnaire was sent to a sample of parents with a child aged 1–3 years in Ireland, recruited by the independent website Everymum.ie. The data was analysed using SPSS 27. Analysis included descriptive statistics to calculate mean (standard deviation) and percentages. The recommendations focused on in this study included: eating a fortified breakfast cereal, red meat 3 times per week, fish once a week, administering a low-dose vitamin D-only supplement every day from Halloween to St Patrick's Day and for those growing at <25th percentile (ages 1–3), the recommendation for a low dose iron-only supplement 4 days per week or use of an iron-fortified full-fat milk or formula<sup>(1)</sup>.

Of the 1,226 participants, 85% were between 25–44 years and 79% had achieved tertiary education. The mean toddler age was 1.8 years (standard deviation 0.58). Only 39% of parents were aware of the new healthy eating guidelines for young children<sup>(1)</sup>. Half of participants (50%) reported not giving their toddler a fortified cereal. A large proportion of toddlers (74%) did not meet the red meat recommendation, and within those 15% (n = 134) did not consume red meat at all. 35% did not meet the recommendation for fish. Of the parents, 48% reported giving their toddler a vitamin D-only supplement, and within those 71% (n = 418) reported giving it daily. For those with a toddler reported to be growing at <25th percentile (n = 46), none were given an iron-only supplement and only 13% reported giving their toddler an iron-fortified young child formula. However, most participants (91%) felt their toddler had a healthy diet.

This study highlights a lack of awareness and compliance, among parents of pre-school children, of the new food-based dietary guidelines for young children in Ireland. The purpose of these healthy eating guidelines is not only to reduce the risk of inadequate intakes of important nutrients like iron, vitamin D, EPA and DHA in this age group, but also develop healthy eating habits for life<sup>(2)</sup>. There is an opportunity to promote the guidelines to build awareness with both parents and healthcare professionals.

### 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](http://www.fsai.ie)]
2. Healthy Ireland, Department of Health (2020) *Healthy eating guidelines for kids*. [Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/da7f19-eat-well/#healthy-eating-guidelines-for-kids>]