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Pregnancy, a missed opportunity to influence later health



A report by the Infant & Toddler Forum (ITF) calls for nutrition guidance in pre-conception and pregnancy to be a public health priority during this critical 'window of opportunity' to improve the health of the next generation.

Backed by stakeholders in early life nutrition, including baby charity Tommy's, Borne and the Pre-school Learning Alliance, the report, *Early Nutrition for Later Health: Time to Act Earlier*, acknowledges the emerging evidence that a mother's weight and nutritional status before, during and between pregnancies can have a long-lasting effect on the health of her children and the risk of disease later in life. Being overweight or obese at the time of conception or gaining excess weight during pregnancy increases the risk of childhood obesity for the baby. However, lifestyle changes before or during pregnancy could reduce that risk.¹

The reality, however, is that we are not doing enough to take advantage of this opportunity. The report paints a picture of confusion and lack of training and information on nutrition and healthy lifestyles in pregnancy for healthcare professionals (HCPs) to advise mums.

Informed by a survey of HCPs, the report finds that 72% of HCPs consider nutrition important in preconception and pregnancy but one third have had no training in the area. Only four in ten HCPs always give advice on nutrition and exercise to pregnant women. While a third of HCPs say explaining the associated risks of obesity to pregnant women is a major challenge they face, a lack of time in consultations is the biggest hurdle, along with encouraging mums to adopt healthy behaviours. Half of the respondents would welcome more training on nutrition in pregnancy.

"Clear guidance in pregnancy and pre-conception needs to be our new focus" says Dr Atul Singhal, Professor of Paediatric Nutrition at the UCL Institute of Child Health, and Chair of the ITF. "Although, the early years are now well-established as critical to influencing health outcomes in later life, and while the past ten years have seen a growing commitment to early years intervention, obesity is still a major public health issue that continues to threaten the health of younger people. England is the ninth fattest nation in Europe, and one in four seven to 11-year-olds are overweight or obese.² That is why we



One in three healthcare professionals have had no training on nutrition in pregnancy or infant breastfeeding.¹

need to focus earlier on in the life cycle, to influence nutrition and life choices from before conception through to preschool.

There has never been a more crucial time to seize this opportunity for the health system to support pregnant mothers to enhance their health and the health of their child."

In response to the findings, the ITF is expanding its educational remit to take a life course approach to nutrition and health, from pregnancy and infancy through to toddlerhood. The ITF's aim is to support and empower HCPs to help families to make healthy lifestyle choices by delivering clear, practical advice on those critical early windows of opportunity to provide children with the best start in life.

Gill Perks, Midwifery Matron, Antenatal and Postnatal Services, NHS and ITF member said:

"This report supports the Department of Health's mantra of 'making every contact count'. In pre-conception and pregnancy we must not miss this opportunity to advise and influence a woman's health, nutritional and dietary habits



The new report by the Infant & Toddler Forum.

and midwives are in an ideal position to support women in this.

"The report supports greater emphasis within primary care of pre-conception clinics to guide all parents-to-be on nutrition and lifestyle. It also calls for action to increase the uptake of recommended vitamins and supplements during pre-conception, pregnancy and breastfeeding. It's not just about giving information; we need to be able to support women to change behaviour by recognising what works for them and having the healthy conversation. A move I support."

The first factsheet in the new pregnancy series, *Healthy Eating in Pregnancy* is available to download from the ITF

website. To find out more information on health and development from pregnancy to preschool, visit the ITF website (www.infantandtoddlerforum.org) and sign up for monthly email bulletins with news and information about the Forum.

The ITF brings together an independent, multidisciplinary team of experts and practitioners from paediatrics, neonatology, health visiting, dietetics, child psychology, midwifery and obstetrics. The Forum provides reliable, evidence-based information and practical tools to support HCPs, parents and carers in making the right choices in infant and toddler feeding, from pregnancy to preschool.

The ITF is supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Danone Nutricia Early Life Nutrition. The views and outputs of the group, however, remain independent of Danone Nutricia Early Life Nutrition and its commercial interest.

References

1. **Infant & Toddler Forum.** *Early Nutrition for Later Health: Time to Act Earlier.* [Online]; 2014. Available from: www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/health-childcare-professionals [Accessed 17 December 2014].
2. **European Association for the Study of Obesity.** *Facts and Statistics.* [Online]; 2013. Available from: <http://easo.org/task-forces/childhood-obesity-cotf/facts-statistics> [Accessed 17 December 2014].

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