

Concurrent Session 16: Infants and Children

Dietary intakes and nutritional status of toddlers and preschoolers in Adelaide

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Background – There is a lack of population data on dietary intake and nutritional status of toddlers and preschoolers in Australia.

Objective – To determine the nutritional intake and status of toddlers and pre-schoolers from a representative population sample in Adelaide (Food Intake and Nutritional Status, FINS, study).

Design – Cross sectional survey of children aged between one and five years. Children were recruited using a door-knocking protocol based on stratified sampling method to obtain a representative sample of this age group. Dietary intake was assessed using a 3-day weighed food diary. Anthropometrics and micronutrient status were assessed.

Outcomes – Three hundreds (52%) eligible families consented to the study. The median energy intake ranged from 4209 KJ/day for children aged between one and two years to 5941 KJ/day for children aged between four and five years. Fourteen percent of children were overweight (BMI > 95 percentile). A majority of children achieved the Estimated Average Requirement (EAR) for key micronutrients including iron, zinc, calcium and vitamin C while only a small percentage of children achieved Adequate Intake (AI) for long chain polyunsaturated fatty acid (32%) and fibre (17%). Fifteen children (5%) had iron deficiency and four children (1.5%) had iron deficiency anaemia. The median erythrocyte phospholipid docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) concentration was 3.7% of total fatty acids.

Conclusion – Children in the study had good nutritional status. DHA status may be sub-optimal due to low intake. Target nutrients for children aged 1-5 years include fibre and DHA.

Supporting parents to influence children's diet and lifestyle - what are parents' concerns?

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Background – The family and home environment is an important setting for shaping children's eating and physical activity behaviours. The role of parents in modelling and promoting healthy lifestyle norms in their children is also well understood. Results from family-focussed obesity prevention and management interventions are encouraging. However, the myriad of lifestyle pressures and concerns make it challenging to engage parents.

Objective – To identify parents' concerns and attitudes towards children's diets, physical activity habits, diet and lifestyle influences and children's weight in order to better engage parents and improve children's diet and lifestyle habits.

Design – Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) was used to collect data from 1202 Australian parents of children aged 2 to 16 years. Participants were randomly selected from an online research panel (n=5246), broadly representative of the Australian population, stratified by location, age and gender of the child. Participants were those with primary knowledge of their child's daily routine, including food and activity habits. Data were weighted for parental education level and analysed using chi-squared test and Kendal's tau-b to compare the results by age and gender of the children and characteristics of the parents. Significance was set at p<0.05.

Outcomes – Children's education was reported as the number one concern by 35% of parents. A quarter of parents reported that their children's health and wellbeing concerned them most as a parent. More parents expressed concern about diet and nutrition (14%) than children's fitness or exercise level (3%). Parental concerns and attitudes towards diet and physical activity varied depending on child's age and parental demographics. Perceived barriers to improving children's diet and activity behaviours included characteristics intrinsic to the child as well as external pressures. A number of parental attitudinal barriers to change were also identified.

Conclusions – The current findings indicate that equipping parents with skills and strategies to promote healthy lifestyle behaviours in their children is likely to be an effective approach for promoting change. Skills to assist parents to manage external influences may be more useful than increasing parents' diet and lifestyle knowledge.