



Exploring the concerns, attitudes and experiences of health professionals regarding a vegan diet during pregnancy and early life; a mixed-method study

B.X.P. Soh¹, P. von Hurst², R. Batty² and C. Conlon²

¹*Sustainable Nutrition Initiative, Riddet Institute, Massey University, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4472, New Zealand*

²*School of Sport, Exercise and Nutrition, College of Health, Massey University Private Bag 102904, North Shore, Auckland 0745, New Zealand*

Vegan diet consumption is gaining popularity globally and in New Zealand. However, plant foods provide absent or limited quantities of important micronutrients such as vitamin B12, iron, zinc, and omega-three fatty acids⁽¹⁾. A restrictive and unplanned vegan diet may thus increase risks of nutrient deficiencies especially during pregnancy and early life if the nutrient demands are not fulfilled. Health professionals who provide primary support for pregnant women and their children are important figures in monitoring the nutritional statuses during the antenatal and postnatal periods⁽²⁾. (Being knowledgeable about the nutritional risks of poorly-planned vegan diets, and having access to appropriate educational resources would support vegan mothers and children to achieve a well-balanced diet. Currently, there are insufficient studies investigating the perspectives of New Zealand's health professionals within the realm of vegan diets during pregnancy and early life. The aim of the research is to utilise a mixed-methods approach to explore these concerns, attitudes, and experiences. Healthcare professionals, including dietitians, nurses, general practitioners and midwives were invited to participate in the study. Knowledge and attitude scores were collected with an online questionnaire and scores were recorded as a proportion of the participants. Subsequently, descriptions of experiences, concerns, and perspectives about the adoption of vegan diets during pregnancy and early life were collected with semi-structured interviews. A total of 14 health professionals completed the study. All health professionals showed positive attitudes towards the adoption of vegan diets during pregnancy but some exhibited greater concern about their restrictive nature especially in early childhood. Achieving intake adequacy and subjecting young children to intensive assessments for nutrient adequacy were among the concerns raised. More than 90% of health professionals were concerned about iron and vitamin B12 deficiencies while less than 50% were concerned about deficiencies in protein, omega-three fatty acids, iodine, zinc and vitamin D. Less than 50% of participants were aware that plant foods do not provide sufficient vitamin B12. More than 50% disagreed that sufficient information about vegan diets during pregnancy and early life is available. Insufficient evidence-based consensus and government guidelines, and limited access and referrals to dietitians for guidance on vegan diets were highlighted as challenges that reduce the overall knowledge and confidence. Hence, continual professional education and updated evidence-based resources would be important steps to support health professionals in providing guidance to individuals on vegan diets.

Keywords: vegan diets; pregnancy; early life; health professionals

Ethics Declaration

Yes

Financial Support

This research received no external funding.

References

1. Sebastiani G, Herranz Barbero A, Borrás-Novell C *et al.* (2019) *Nutrients* **11**(3), 557.
2. Baroni L, Goggi S, Battaglini R *et al.* (2018) *Nutrients* **11**(1), 5.