What influences the timing of the introduction of solid food to infants?

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The aim of the present study was to assess the factors which may influence the timing of the introduction of solid food to infants. The design was a prospective cohort study by interview and postal questionnaire. Primiparous women (n 541) aged between 16 and 40 years were approached in the Forth Park Maternity Hospital, Fife, Scotland. Of these, 526 women agreed to participate and seventy-eight were used as subjects in the pilot study. At 12 weeks we interviewed 338 women of the study sample. The postal questionnaire was returned by 286 of 448 volunteers. At 12 weeks 133 of 338 mothers said that they had introduced solids. Those that said that they had introduced solids early (<12 weeks) were compared with those who had introduced solids late (>12 weeks) by bivariate and multiple regression analysis. Psychosocial factors influencing the decision were measured with the main outcome measure being the time of introduction of solid food. The early introduction of solids was found to be associated with: the opinions of the infant’s maternal grandmother; living in a deprived area; personal disagreement with the advice to wait until the baby was 4 months; lack of encouragement from friends to wait until the baby was 4 months; being in receipt of free samples of manufactured food. Answers to open-ended questions indicated that the early introduction appeared to be influenced by the mothers’ perceptions of the baby’s needs. Some of the factors influencing a woman’s decision to introduce solids are amenable to change, and these could be targeted in educational interventions.

Infant diets: Solid foods: Weaning: Health promotion: Breast-feeding

Nutrition in the early years of life is a major determinant of growth and development (Fall et al. 1992). In the first Dundee infant feeding study we found that breast-feeding gave protection against gastroenteritis and respiratory infection (Howie et al. 1990), and in a follow-up study, that breast-feeding leads to less-frequent respiratory infection and lower blood pressure at age 7–8 years (Wilson et al. 1998). The timing of the first introduction of solids was an important confounding factor for subsequent health. Infants introduced to solid food before 4 months had higher levels of morphometric features characteristic of cardiovascular risk such as increased body fat and BMI, and had more wheezy respiratory illness. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Food in its Report of the Working Group on the Weaning Diet (Department of Health and Social Security, 1994) recommends that the majority of infants should not be given solid food before the age of 4 months, and recently the World Heath Organization (2002) recommended exclusive breast-feeding until 6 months. Delaying the introduction of solid food until after 4 months may confer benefit in families with a history of atopy or gluten enteropathy (Kelly et al. 1989).

Government surveys of infant feeding found that, in Scotland, 64% of mothers had introduced solids by 3 months in 1995 (Foster et al. 1997). In 2000 this had fallen to 28%, and 50% had given solid food before 4 months (Hamlyn et al. 2001). Bottle-feeding, higher birth weight, lower age of mother leaving full-time education, lower social class of husband or partner, lower educational level and maternal smoking habits were associated with earlier introduction of solid food (Hamlyn et al. 2001). The infant-feeding surveys did not ask about reasons for the timing of introduction of solids, which could be influenced by several psychosocial variables. A qualitative study found that erratic meal patterns were given as a reason for the introduction of solids by bottle-feeding women but by fewer breast-feeding women. Bottle-feeding women identify vigour of sucking as a reason for believing the infant to be hungry whereas breast-feeding women cite the change in frequency or demand for feeds at particular

Abbreviation: OR, odds ratio.

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times of the day as a reason (Wright, 1981). Bottle-fed infants sleep through the night at an earlier age than breast-fed infants and this may be an incentive to change the method of feeding (Wright, 1981; Drewett et al. 1998). In the first 6 months women may be very fatigued (Alder, 1994) and may wish to reduce the number of night feeds in order to get a longer time to sleep (Wright, 1981).

In a qualitative study, twenty-nine primiparous women recruited from Forth Park Hospital, Kirkcaldy with infants whose ages ranged from 8 to 18 weeks participated in focus groups. They were from the same population as the survey study reported in the present paper. We found that physical characteristics and the perceived hunger of the infant were the key influences on the introduction of solids (Anderson et al. 2001). For instance, physical characteristics such as the age of the infant, whether the infant was teething, and the infant reaching a certain weight or size were cited as prompts to introduce solid food. The overriding aim of all women was to settle their infant so that the child was happier and more contented.

If parents are to be encouraged to delay the introduction of solids until 4 months it is important to know their reasons for introducing solids earlier. More support from professionals has been advocated, but awareness of recommended weaning practices among some health professionals may be relatively poor (Higginson, 2001). The results from the present study would enable health professionals to focus their advice effectively. We report in the present paper the results from a study in which we aimed to explore the social and psychological reasons for introducing solids by comparing women who introduce solids early with those delaying the introduction of solids.

Methods

A consecutive sample of primiparous women in the postnatal ward, Kirkcaldy with infants whose ages ranged from 8 to 18 weeks participated in focus groups. They were from the same population as the survey study reported in the present paper. We found that physical characteristics and the perceived hunger of the infant were the key influences on the introduction of solids (Anderson et al. 2001). For instance, physical characteristics such as the age of the infant, whether the infant was teething, and the infant reaching a certain weight or size were cited as prompts to introduce solid food. The overriding aim of all women was to settle their infant so that the child was happier and more contented.

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Results

Of the 541 women approached in the postnatal ward, fifteen women refused and 526 agreed to participate. Seventy-eight women were used to pilot the interviews and postal questionnaires. Of the 448 mothers invited to...
be interviewed at 12 weeks postpartum, 338 agreed (76%). None who refused the interview was sent a postal questionnaire. The postal questionnaire was returned by 286 of the 448 women. If data were missing at 12 or 20 weeks they were excluded from the comparative analysis.

Characteristics of the sample

The women interviewed at 12 weeks were no different in their deprivation scores based on postcode, sex of baby or babies’ birth weight from those not agreeing to be interviewed. However, 59% of mothers who agreed to take part were aged over 25 years compared with 33% of those who declined ($\chi^2 = 3.9$, df 1; $P = 0.05$).

About one half of the babies were male ($n = 168$) and one half female ($n = 170$). The mean gestation was 40.12 (SD 1.33, range 35–42) weeks. The majority of women were of white ethnic group (99%). The majority (66%) were married or living with a partner. The mean parental age of leaving school was 17.39 (SD 2.15) years. Only seventy-five (16%) mothers reported that they had had health problems after the birth, including eight with mastitis and six with postnatal depression. The majority of women lived in areas with deprivation category scores of 3 or 4 (Table 1).

Patterns of infant feeding

Most women (71%) had breast-fed their infants at least once after delivery, but by 3 months most (86%) had also given their infants formula milk. Only 15% breast-fed exclusively for 12 weeks. At the 12-week interview 40% said that they had introduced solids (133/338) although forty-three of these said that they had stopped and started. When asked at 12 weeks when they intended to give their infant solid food, most (60%) said at 16 weeks, but twenty-three (11%) said when their infants were ready. Seven mothers had not thought about when they might introduce solids. In the postal questionnaire follow-up at 20 weeks, 272 of the 286 respondents (95%) had given their babies solids, and in total 278 reported the age at which solids were introduced (Fig. 1).

Comparison of early (≤12 weeks) and delayed (>12 weeks) solids

The bivariate analysis revealed that women who introduced their infants to solids early were more likely to have a male baby (OR 2.01; 95% CI 1.26, 3.21), to use formula feed (OR 2.10; 95% CI 1.27, 3.47), and to have received free food samples (OR 2.74; 95% CI 1.70, 4.43). The women were more likely to have smoked during pregnancy (OR 3.27; 95% CI 1.90, 5.60), to be from a lower social class.

Table 1. Deprivation index (Carstairs & Morris, 1991) of the sample interviewed at 12 weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deprivation category score</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percentage of 338</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Affluent)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (Deprived)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>338</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Significant variables ($P < 0.05$) in the regression model.
Table 3. Multiple regression analysis for the final model (see Table 2); the dependent variable was whether the infant was introduced to solids ≤12 or >12 weeks (n 213)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n†</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
<th>Wald χ²</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opinions of baby’s maternal grandmother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6·09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0·014</td>
<td>0·14</td>
<td>0·03, 0·45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree‡</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6·09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0·014</td>
<td>0·14</td>
<td>0·03, 0·45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion either way</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6·09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0·014</td>
<td>0·14</td>
<td>0·03, 0·45</td>
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<td>Closest friends recommend waiting until the</td>
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<tr>
<td>baby is 4 months before giving solids</td>
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<tr>
<td>In receipt of free sample of solid food</td>
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</table>

* We selected to run the model forwards and thus the categories were compared with the first variable, the deprivation score.
† Numbers included in multiple regression analysis.
‡ Reference group.

We chose to analyse the data using 12 weeks because of our expectation, which proved accurate, that most mothers would have introduced solids by 16 weeks. Of the mothers, 87% had introduced solids by 16 weeks inclusive.

The percentage introducing solids by 12 weeks inclusive (41%) was higher than the data reported for Scotland (28%) in the 2000 feeding survey (Hamlyn et al. 2001).

At 20 weeks, nearly all women (95%) had given their babies solid food. Bivariate analysis showed that the early introduction of solids was associated with young age, having a male baby, social class, age of leaving full-time education and smoking. In the regression, only deprivation was an independent factor. In a New Zealand study of over 1800 infants, low levels of maternal education and maternal smoking were found to be most strongly associated with the early introduction of solids (Ford et al. 1995) and socio-economic status and education were reported in the 2000 survey (Hamlyn et al. 2001). None of these variables is open to change by a direct intervention on infant feeding, and are similar to those that are associated with the duration of breast-feeding. The regression analysis also showed that the opinions of the baby’s maternal grandmother and of friends were significant, suggesting the importance of the social group. These and the mothers’ beliefs about the correctness of the advice may be open to change.

The timing of when the mother is given the free sample may be crucial. If it comes before 4 months perhaps she is encouraged to try the food and it may imply that it is acceptable to give solids before 4 months. Future research would need to clarify whether it was the timing of being given the food sample or whether it was simply being given free samples that caused the association.

Discussion

At the end of the exploratory regression analyses, seven variables contributed significantly (P ≤0·05) and persistently to whether a woman introduced her infant to solids before or after 12 weeks of age (Table 2). Women were more likely to introduce their infants to solids early if they had delivered a boy and if they were young (under 20 years). Women who disagreed with advice to wait until their infant was 4 months old before introducing solids, with high deprivation scores, who had received free samples of manufactured food, who did not believe that giving solids early would harm their infant, and who were strongly influenced by their own mothers’ opinion were more likely to introduce solids early (Table 3).

Regression results

OR 2·12; 95% CI 1·28, 3·52), and to have left full-time education before 18 years (OR 2·74; 95% CI 1·42, 5·37). Younger women (under 20 years) were also more likely to introduce solids early (Table 3).

Women who introduced solids early did not differ from those who delayed introducing solids in the following respects: living in extended families; marital status; employment status of women or partner at 12 weeks; health problems after the birth; age of mother; gestation age of infant.

Women who had already introduced solids by 12 weeks were asked about their decision. Many (ninety-six; 56%) hoped that their infant would settle more easily after the introduction of solids and many (eighty-eight; 52%) hoped that their infant would sleep through the night. Women who disagreed with advice to wait until their infant was 4 months old before introducing solids, with high deprivation scores, who had received free samples of manufactured food, who did not believe that giving solids early would harm their infant, and who were strongly influenced by their own mothers’ opinion were more likely to introduce solids early (Table 3).

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Timing of introduction of solids

Bottle-feeders introduced solids earlier than breast-feeders but this difference disappeared in the regression analysis, probably because it was confounded with deprivation. Those who had not yet introduced solids at 12 weeks hoped that the baby would settle more easily and sleep though the night after solids were introduced. The baby being happier, more content and seeming to enjoy solids were reasons for continuing solids once started. These findings supported the results from the qualitative study (Anderson et al. 2001).

The data were mainly collected at 12 weeks by home interview, at which time 40% of mothers had already introduced solids. The women’s reasons were therefore assessed after they had introduced solids and therefore were retrospective. It would be interesting to assess the decision making immediately before the introduction of solids and this would need to be assessed using daily diaries.

Successful interventions need to focus on those variables that can be changed by health promotion interventions whilst recognising the need for greater societal changes. Both the qualitative and quantitative results support the suggestion that the mothers’ introduction of solids is led by their perception of their baby’s needs; this could provide a promising message for the design of an effective educational intervention.

Acknowledgements

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References


