

Kids May Eat Their Veggies If You Follow This Approach

Young toddlers who eat a range of fruits and vegetables may learn to enjoy healthy eating as they grow older, an Australian study suggests.

Researchers found that 14-month-old babies who regularly ate fruits and vegetables were more likely to eat them and less likely to be fussy eaters when they were nearly four years old.

“The take-home message for parents is pretty simple: introduce your toddler to a range of healthy foods early ... this means offering your child a variety of different fruits and vegetables,” said lead author Kimberley Mallan, a researcher at the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane.

“Children need to learn to like some foods, particularly vegetables, and repeated, neutral exposure is the best approach,” she said.

Food preferences are developed as early as the first two years of life, Mallan and colleagues write in *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. But up to a third of children do not eat fruits and vegetables in their first three years and most eat unhealthy snack foods, according to past research.

About a fourth of Australian children and nearly a third of American youth are overweight or obese, the authors note.

The researchers compared the dietary habits of 174 children whose mothers received nutrition counseling to 165 who did not. All were part of a larger Australian study of mothers and children from Brisbane and Adelaide, starting in 2008 and 2009.

Dietitians and psychologists counseled the mothers in six 1.5- to 2-hour interactive group sessions every two weeks. Data on babies were collected at birth, age four months and age 14 months, with follow-up at two years and 3.7 years.

Researchers used various scales and questionnaires to measure the number of fruits and vegetables and “noncore foods” the children tried weekly at each age. Noncore foods are not in the “core” food groups like milk, which babies and young kids should consume every day, according to nutrition guidelines. They include cookies, candy, salty snacks and other less-healthy foods.

Both groups of mothers had about the same number of fussy kids at age 14 months.

The babies who tried a greater number of fruits and vegetables liked these foods more at 3.7 years than those who did not eat the items when they were younger. Eating a greater number of noncore foods as an infant was also associated with liking those snacks more as a .

“Parents are not ‘depriving’ their child by not offering these foods, rather they are investing in their child’s long-term health ... ,” Mallan said by email to Reuters Health.

The associations were still strong after accounting for maternal age at delivery, education and BMI, the child’s sex, breastfeeding duration, age when solid foods were introduced and infant fussiness.

Trying fewer vegetables (though not fruits and non-core items, which tend to be sweeter) as infants was also tied to more fussiness as children.

Lara Field, a registered dietitian with a nutrition counseling practice in Chicago, said the results might not “correlate” to the U.S. because of different obesity rates, cultural factors, accessibility to fresh food or popularity of fast food. But

the study reinforces the importance of introducing healthy foods early and encouraging children to eat fruits and vegetables, rather than filling up on unhealthy snacks, she said.

“When children reject a food, is it because they don’t like it, or is it because they have been fed too many snacks throughout the day, and are simply too full to be interested in food? When approached with a plate of broccoli, they may reject it, but if they were hungry, perhaps they would have been more willing to eat it,” Field said in an email.

Parents also need to adopt the same healthy eating they expect of their kids and find ways to make meals enjoyable, said Field, who was not involved in the study.

“Bottom line, kids mimic what they see at home,” said Field. “If you want your kids to eat veggies, you need to also.”

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