



Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

Infant Feeding Guidelines

Journalist Briefing

What are the Infant Feeding Guidelines?

The Infant Feeding Guidelines aims to assist health workers in providing consistent advice to the general public about infant feeding. The Guidelines include advice and recommendations on breastfeeding, supporting mothers and parents, the introduction of solids, preparing infant formula and other common health related concerns.

The Infant Feeding Guidelines are relevant to healthy, term infants of normal birth weight (>2500g). Although many of the principles of infant feeding described here can be applied to low birth weight infants, specific medical advice is recommended for pre-term and underweight infants.

An electronic copy of the Guidelines is available at www.eatforhealth.gov.au.

Why have they been revised?

Since the 2003 edition of the Guidelines, developments in infant feeding have required revision, updated references and consideration of the Australian context.

What is the evidence based on?

The search and guideline development strategies used for the Infant Feeding Guidelines is identical to that used for the Australian Dietary Guidelines, with the addition of a specific systematic literature review.

In identifying evidence regarding infant feeding practices and health outcomes, NHMRC reviewed over 2700 quality peer-reviewed studies.

The Guidelines were released for public consultation from 24 October 2011 until 5 December 2011.

NHMRC has also consulted with a range of clinicians involved in infant and early childhood health including paediatric immunologists. Women's groups and industry were also consulted.

Key evidence documents can be accessed at www.eatforhealth.gov.au.

What has changed since the last edition?

Key messages in the revised Guidelines are similar to the 2003 version, but the revised Guidelines have been updated with recent scientific evidence about health outcomes.

This version is a stand-alone document, whereas the 2003 version was within the dietary guidelines for infants and children. (other documents were guidelines for adults, and guidelines for older Australians)

Specifically, the evidence has strengthened for:

- The benefits of breastfeeding.
- The association between breastfeeding and a reduced risk of becoming obese in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood.
- The association between breastfeeding support and increased duration of exclusive and any breastfeeding.
- The importance of introducing solid foods at around 6 months of age to meet nutritional requirements and decrease risk of allergy development.

- The order of introducing solids; as long as iron-rich foods are included in first foods, foods can be introduced in any order and at a rate that suits the infant.
- The implementation of the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative improves breastfeeding outcomes.

What has changed since Public Consultation?

A consultation draft was disseminated from October to December 2012 with the aim of gathering input from a wide range of experts, stakeholders and consumer representatives. Over 130 submissions were fully considered and the Guidelines were revised accordingly.

In summary, public consultation indicated that more information and/or consideration were requested for exclusive breastfeeding, age of introducing solids and allergy development. Recent scientific articles were also added to the Guideline.

What does this mean for health professionals?

Australia has been successful in increasing breastfeeding rates over the last few decades, but there is still considerable room for improvement.

- While the initiation rate of breastfeeding is over 90%, rates of any breastfeeding decline to around 50% at 6 months and only around 25% of women breastfeed for 12 months.
- Only a small proportion of women exclusively breastfeed to 6 months. The 2001 Australian National Health Survey reported that at 25 weeks, around 65% of infants were regularly receiving solid food. The 2010 Australian National Infant Feeding Study found that the median age for introducing solids was 4.7 months.

From a public health perspective, achieving further improvements in both the type and duration of breastfeeding offers considerable benefits for maternal, infant and child and life course health for Australians.

What are the general messages?

- In Australia, it is recommended that infants are exclusively breastfed until around 6 months of age when solid foods are introduced, and that breastfeeding is continued until 12 months of age and beyond, for as long as the mother and child desire.
- A mother's informed decision not to breastfeed should be respected and support from a health worker and/or other members of the multidisciplinary team provided.
- If an infant is not breastfed or is partially breastfed, commercial infant formulas should be used as an alternative to breast milk until 12 months of age. Health workers should provide families with all of the information and support they need to prepare, store and use the infant formulas correctly.
- Introducing solid foods at around 6 months is necessary to meet the infant's increasing nutritional and developmental needs. As long as iron-rich foods are included in first foods, foods can be introduced in any order and at a rate that suits the infant. Delaying the introduction of solid foods beyond this age may increase the risk of developing allergic symptoms.
- By 12 months of age, a variety of nutritious foods from the Five Food Groups is recommended, as described in the Australian Dietary Guidelines.