Breaking down new nutritional recommendations for infants and toddlers

Source: Courtney Luecking, extension specialist in health and nutrition

An increasing amount of research indicates it is important for children to have healthy eating behaviors from the start. Healthy dietary patterns in infancy and toddlerhood support growth and development and lay the foundation of behaviors that can continue into adulthood and lead to a lifetime of good health and lower rates of chronic diseases. To help children get off to a healthy start, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services asked the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Committee to, for the first time ever, establish recommendations for healthy eating guidelines for children who are between the ages of 6 months and 2 years.

Consistent with recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization, the committee recommended infants get all nutrients preferably from breast milk for the first 6 months of their lives. As infants’ development varies greatly during the first six months, and much depends on their milk source, either breast milk or fortified infant formula, the committee did not provide definitive recommendations. Parents or caregivers can start introducing nutrient-dense foods between 4-6 months of age.

The recommended pattern or combination of foods for children aged 6 to 24 months includes small amounts of a variety of plant- and animal-sourced foods. Vegetables, fruits, whole grains and foods such as beef, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy provide key nutrients for healthy growth and development. For infants exclusively breastfed, foods rich in iron and zinc are particularly important. Recommendations also include approximate daily or weekly amounts of food groups. The lack of specific recommendations for certain types of foods within each group provides families flexibility in exploring a variety of healthy foods that meet cultural preferences and food budgets.

Children under 2 years old should not have any type of product that contains added sugars. The energy in these products can displace nutrients in the child’s body and increase their risk of developing a nutritional deficiency that can have negative long-term effects. Products with added sugars, particularly sugar-sweetened beverages, have been linked with increased rates of overweight or obesity.

The committee’s recommendations encourage parents and caregivers to begin introducing common allergen foods like peanuts and eggs to children as early as 6 months old. Research suggests young children who are introduced to these foods have a lower risk of developing a food allergy later in life. Since whole peanuts present a choking hazard, you should choose peanut-based products like peanut butter for young children. You can also introduce other common food allergens like shellfish, wheat and tree nuts at this time. Less research exists on these foods compared to peanuts and eggs, but the report says there is no reason to exclude them from young children’s diets.

You can learn more about the new USDA dietary recommendations and how to meet the nutritional needs of your family at the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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