


Food in early life: communicating about food and health

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Most helpful source of advice on feeding 

	England & Wales		Scotland		Northern Ireland		United Kingdom	
	1995 %	2000 %	1995 %	2000 %	1995 %	2000 %	1995 %	2000 %
Health visitor	62	59	60	60	57	59	61	59
Friends/ relatives	50	51	52	51	55	56	50	51
Books/ leaflets etc.	27	32	26	32	22	27	27	32
Midwife	9	10	7	10	8	10	9	10
Doctor/ GP	9	7	9	9	9	11	9	7
Vol organisation	2	1	1	1	-	*	2	1
TV/ radio	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Other	2	4	1	3	2	3	2	3
Base (All Stage 3 mothers)	4300	4112	1747	1718	1399	1437	4848	7267

Percentages do not add up to 100% as some mothers gave more than one answer

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Key to appropriate communication about infant is an understanding of the scientific evidence on which recommendations are based. The association between early nutrition and later health outcomes known as metabolic programming (or early nutrition programming) is well acknowledged amongst scientists and health experts, but currently this association is not always reflected in communications aimed directly at parents nor in policy documents for professionals.

Given the importance of early nutrition programming, a major challenge is to promote healthy infant feeding by parents. However, this cannot be accomplished unless both parents and health professionals understand basic infant nutrition and its implications for later health. Infants are completely dependent on their careers to make decisions about their food choices. Parents gain knowledge from a wide range of sources including health professionals, the media, friends, and relatives.

It is also important to understand the potential influence of the media on perceptions of infant feeding. There is little systematic research on this topic. The issue of food choice is complex and influenced by a wide range of social and psychological factors, especially for a mother providing solid food to an infant for the first time. The decision to wean is one that is made by the mother after taking a number of factors into account and future health outcomes are by no means the sole driver of this decision.

Many barriers to healthy behaviour exist, but a prerequisite is accurate knowledge and understanding of the causes and consequences of particular diseases and the role of lifelong nutrition in increasing susceptibility or protecting against health problems in the future. Without an appreciation of the threat to health posed by certain behaviours, parents have little incentive to adopt health promoting feeding regimens for their infants. There is need to understand better the choice criteria of parents with respect to weaning and baby foods, in order to also tailor the messages delivering the health information.

With increasing mobility of populations across the EC, it would be preferable, for all EC citizens, if advice and information on maternal and infant feeding for professionals and for consumers were consistent.