



The right

With obesity rates on the rise among children, parents need to start as they mean to go on and give children the best nutritional start in life, writes **Louise Peard**.

Children's nutrition is a hot topic. Groups of concerned health professionals and parents are lobbying the government to limit or ban junk food advertising to children, while latest figures show that the incidence of overweight and obesity in children is on the rise. Meanwhile, some children aren't getting the vitamins and other nutrients they need for healthy growth.

According to Pip Golley, accredited practicing dietician and Dieticians Association of Australia spokesperson, there are several reasons why some parents are having difficulty getting the nutritional balance right.

'There are so many barriers, and they exist at various levels,' she told PS. 'At an individual level there are things like having poor nutritional knowledge, poor food skills, poor knowledge of cooking and how to prepare foods, lack of time and lack of confidence.'

'We also know that different cultures have varying levels of nutrition, and that many of the indigenous population have particularly poor diets.'

'In some cases, it's environmental issues like the sheer amount of energy-

dense, nutrient-poor foods out there, and the fact that parents are being bombarded with more pester power from children.'

'Socio-economic barriers exist, as well, and low-income families often have poorer nutrition, as do people in remote areas — this can be linked with education, but also sometimes it's simply that people from low socio-economic backgrounds have limited access to fresh, safe, nutritious foods at reasonable prices. This is particularly important in remote areas where fresh produce is very expensive.'

The right start

Good nutrition begins at birth — and it's still recommended that babies be breastfed exclusively until they are six months old.

Australian Breastfeeding Association President Querida David said that more

than 90% of mothers initiate breastfeeding.

The reality is that many women choose to either feed their babies with formula, or use it to complement breastfeeding, and so pharmacy assistants need to make themselves familiar with the myriad formula options, according to Priceline's Penny Delangen, who was NSW Pharmacy Assistant of the Year in 2010.

'There are so many different types, so it's handy to know the difference between Gold and regular formulas, formulas



formula

that have LCPs for eyes [long-chain-polyunsaturated fatty acids, or LCPs, are omega fats which play a role in the development of a baby's brain, eyes and nervous system] and formulas that are whey-dominated or casein-dominated.'

An example of this confusion is that many parents are using hypoallergenic formulas specifically designed for babies with allergies or a high-risk of allergies, she said, when it's not necessary.

'But often, as soon as we say "has your family got a history of allergies, or does the baby have an actual allergy?" they haven't. There's no point in breaking down the extra proteins and using these formulas unnecessarily if there's no risk of

'Children are still eating too much fat and too much sugar'

allergies,' Ms Delangen said.

'We need to make sure they're aware of why they're using certain formulas — not just HA formula, but also if the baby's colicky they may need a thickened formula.'

Sometimes babies suffer from digestive problems simply because the parents don't understand how to prepare formula properly, Ms Delangen said.

This can involve incorrect preparation methods like putting formula powder into a bottle and then adding water, rather than adding the powder last; packing down the powder into the scoop, rather than letting

it settle naturally; or putting in heaped scoops of powder. All these result in a more concentrated formula which can cause discomfort or difficulty digesting the milk.

Once babies begin eating solids, pharmacy assistants can offer powdered rice cereals, and recommend parents make up healthy starter foods like pureed fruit and vegetables, rather than commercially prepared jars available in supermarkets.

Fast food nation

Pip Golley said that many Australian children didn't get the recommended daily two serves of fruit and five of vegetables, but worse, many were indulging in energy-dense and nutrient-poor (often known as EDNP) foods like fast food, lollies and chocolate, chips and soft drinks.

'Children are still eating too much fat and too much sugar,' she said. 'One study found that in the two to three year age group, dairy foods and cereal contribute about half the total intake.'

'A 1995 national nutrition survey looked at soft drink consumption, which is something often targeted by obesity advocates. It showed that 26% of two to three year olds had consumed a soft drink in the last 24 hours — you'd never guess it would be that high, not in two and three year-olds.'

She said that given how old the study was, it was extremely likely that the figure would now be much higher — 'I think it's going up.'

'You've got children having excessive energy intakes and low physical activity levels, and those children are at risk of

a whole range of health issues, ranging from respiratory problems like asthma to orthopaedic problems, polycystic ovaries when they get older, and psychosocial issues like bullying, having poor body image and low self-esteem.

'Overweight children are more likely to grow into overweight adults, so they'd be at greater risk of cardiovascular disease, osteoarthritis, diabetes, gall bladder disease... so early intervention is actually really important.'

Part of the problem, according to many health professionals, is the amount of junk food advertising viewed by the average Australian child.

According to the Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC), industry self-regulation of this advertising is 'utterly ineffective'.

It has put together a blueprint to protect children from advertising of EDNP foods.

'Australian consumers have had enough of junk food companies marketing unhealthy food to children,' senior policy advisor for the OPC Jane Martin said.

OPC research showed that 84% of consumers thought children should be protected from unhealthy food advertising, and just under nine-in-10 were in favour of stronger government regulation. Ninety-seven per cent said the government should regulate the use of email or SMS food marketing to children, with 79% saying it should be stopped altogether.

'The way the DAA sees it is that it supports the restrictions on advertising of junk food, but it also wants to see a framework where healthy foods are promoted to children,' Pip Golley told PS. ■