

# UT News

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\*\*\*\*Should fat babies go on a diet?

DALLAS--A baby's chubby little cheeks and plump arms and legs are not reason enough to put the infant on a diet, says Dr. Ricardo Uauy, a researcher in the Center for Human Nutrition at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

Baby fat is a sign that a newborn is getting the extra calories needed to triple its birthweight in the first year of life. To do that, babies need 50 percent of their energy to come from fat, with milk--ideally mother's milk--supplying that need perfectly, Uauy (pronounced "Wowee") says.

Uauy, a pediatric nutritionist and authority in treating children with high cholesterol levels, says fat is an important energy source in baby's first year because it can deliver more calories to small stomachs than low-energy, bulky foods, such as cereal. "A baby's stomach is small. To get the same number of calories from cereal and other lower energy foods, babies would have to eat more than their stomachs can hold."

While firm guidelines do not yet exist regarding how much dietary fat is too much during a child's first two years, researchers like Uauy are trying to answer those questions.

Over the age of two, guidelines on dietary fat consumption have been established by the American Heart Association. Since growth slows down after age two, the association advocates decreasing fat intake to 30 percent of the diet, just as in adults. (The average American diet is 40 percent of calories in fat.)

Uauy recommends replacing whole milk with skim milk in a child's diet to help keep saturated fat calories to a level below 10 percent of the child's daily caloric intake.

Why is it so important to cut down on dietary fat after age two? Because studies show that fatty streaks in blood vessels--the first signs of atherosclerosis--begin in childhood, Uauy says. Beginning with fatty streaks, the fat deposits progress throughout life. Eventually they develop into the fibrous deposits and narrowed arteries that cause heart attacks and strokes--currently the cause of death in half of all Americans.

This life-long process of clogging arteries with fatty cholesterol is speeded up when blood levels of cholesterol are too high. Children who have inherited problems of cholesterol production or removal begin having heart attacks early in life.

So which children should be screened for high levels of cholesterol? Both the American Heart Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics say there is no need for mass screening. Children should be screened, however, if they come from families with a history of heart disease or stroke or if their parents have abnormal levels of cholesterol in their blood.

Drugs and diets are available to bring cholesterol to levels near normal except in the most severe cases, for which new treatments are being developed, Uauy explains. But it is important to have a child checked if heart disease runs in the family.

"The time to worry about atherosclerosis is not when you have your first heart attack or your first stroke. Since we know the process begins in childhood and continues throughout the life cycle, parents can decrease the risk of their children's dying of heart disease and stroke by being conscious of what they feed them when they are young," says Uauy.

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Here are a some other interesting facts about dietary fat and childhood nutrition:

--The fat in infant formula is usually made of corn oil, which is a poly-unsaturated form of fat. The predominant fat in human milk, in contrast, is mono-unsaturated (similar to the fat in olive oil). Studies at the health science center suggest that monounsaturated fat may be better for you.

--Some breastfeeding mothers have a higher fat content in their milk than do others, Uauy says. Recent studies show that an infant will take less time to nurse and will gain weight a little faster if a mother has more fat in her milk. If a mother with less fat in her milk will continue to breastfeed, the fat content will increase over time to fulfill her infant's caloric needs.

--It is thought that the fat content in a mother's milk is regulated by hormones and diet or by a combination of the two.

--Crash diets should be avoided by breastfeeding mothers if their nursing is to be a success, Uauy says. They need four or five pounds of extra fat for energy reserves if they are lactating for six months just because the energy needs of lactation are high. To make up the 800 to 1000 calories a day required for nursing, the body can draw about 300 calories from this energy reserve, leaving 500 to 800 extra calories a day to be supplied from the diet.

--Breastfeeding can act as an effective way to lose the extra weight brought on by pregnancy: 600 to 800 calories a day are put into the outpouring of milk and another 200 calories is used to make the milk.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and the School of Allied Health Sciences.