Study shows no significant nutritional differences in baby-led weaning vs. spoon-feeding

Babies consumed the same number of calories whether they fed themselves solids or were spoon-fed.

In recent years, baby-led weaning—the practice of letting babies hand-feed themselves solid foods as they transition away from bottles or breastfeeding – has seen a huge boom in popularity. Traditionally, the next step after breastmilk or formula is pureed food from a spoon. But as more and more parents are going straight to solids instead, there's very little research showing what the potential effects might be.

So Kinzie Matzeller, a researcher at the University of Colorado, decided to study baby-led weaning. What they found is that baby-led weaning doesn't appear to offer any strong nutritional benefits – but it doesn't have any real drawbacks, either. Babies who eat solid foods consume the same calories and grow at the same rate as babies who are spoon-fed, according to Matzeller's research.

"One major concern with baby-led weaning was that it wasn't known whether it provided enough nutrients to support infant growth," Matzeller says. "It is reassuring to know that baby-led weaning provides adequate calories for growth."

To discover this, Matzeller and her colleagues asked parents of 100 healthy, five-month-old babies living in Denver, Colorado to report their babies' food and milk intake for

three days, plus weigh the food on their babies' plates before and after eating to determine exactly how much was consumed.

The parents then repeated this process when their babies were nine and 12 months old. Matzeller's team weighed and measured the babies at each data collection point.

35 of the babies were on a baby-led weaning diet, which was defined for the study as getting less than 10% of their calories from pureed food. 35 babies on conventional weaning diets were then selected for comparison, who matched the baby-led weaning group in terms of race, sex, and whether they were breast- or formula-fed.

"Previous studies have relied on self-reporting for classifying baby-led weaning," said Matzeller. "The fact that we used data from diet records sets our study apart from previous research and may help provide a more universal definition for baby-led weaning, which would help standardize research on the topic."

Matzeller and her team found no significant difference in the calories the babies in the two groups consumed per kilogram of their body weight at any time during the study.

At nine and 12 months, the baby-led weaning group had gained more weight compared to their age and height, but it was so minimal that, "Anecdotally, if you gave me two growth charts of a baby-weaned versus conventionally weaned infant, I probably wouldn't be able to tell you which one is which," Matzeller said. "And even looking at the babies, they're pretty similar."

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