

Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition

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Dear Dr Bye

Thank you for letter of 20th December requesting SACN's view on:

- the introduction of gluten before 6 months of age to infants without a family history of atopy or gluten enteropathy,
- the consumption of oat and oat ingredients before 6 months of age.

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's (SACN) Subgroup on Maternal and Child Nutrition (SMCN) considered these issues at their first meeting on the 22nd January 2003. The conclusions reached by the Subgroup were also endorsed by SACN at its meeting on 12/02/03 are set out below.

1. Should gluten be given to infants before 6 months if they have no family history of atopy or gluten enteropathy?

As you know, SACN originally considered the introduction of gluten on 27th March 2002 and agreed that it would be prudent to continue with the COMA recommendation on gluten in infant foods, as outlined in its 1994 report Weaning and the Weaning Diet:

"Where there is a family history of atopy or gluten enteropathy, mothers should be encouraged to breastfeed for six months or longer. Weaning before four months should particularly be discouraged and the introduction of foods traditionally regarded as allergenic should be delayed until six months at the earliest." [paragraph 11.1.4]

"To prevent coeliac disease the cereals given to infants less than 6 months should preferably be gluten free, such as rice or maize."[para 11.1.8]

SMCN acknowledged that confusion could arise from the context in which the above two statements were made. The subgroup however reiterated that a substantial body of evidence

indicates that the early introduction of gluten could influence the risk of developing coeliac disease in early childhood. It was moreover unable to identify any nutritional case for feeding gluten-containing solids to healthy infants before the age of 6 months. **If mothers choose to wean before the age of 6 months, it is recommended that foods containing gluten should not be introduced.**

In summary, SMCN reiterated COMA's recommendations and emphasised that they apply to all infants, not just to those at risk by virtue of a family history of atopy or coeliac disease. The Committee advised that foods containing gluten should not be given to infants below the age of 6 months.

2. Should oats and oat ingredients be given to infants before 6 months?

Members noted that studies have shown that adults with coeliac disease can tolerate up to 50g of oats per day (Maki and Collin 1997; Janatuinen et al 2002). However, evidence of safety of oats or oat ingredients is very limited in children and absent in infants. Hence, the safety of oats in an infant's diet particularly before the age of 6 months cannot be based on the evidence of tolerance in adults.

More importantly, it is recognised that there is a significant risk of oat products being contaminated with wheat during processing or packaging. As even a small amount of gluten can trigger allergic response in infants, the Committee felt it prudent to avoid oats and oat ingredients before the age of 6 months. In summary, **Members agreed that, a precautionary approach should be adopted and that oats should not be given to any infants before 6 months of age, even when there is no family history of atopy or coeliac disease.**

I hope this helps to clarify advice on giving gluten-containing foods to infants below the age of six months.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sheela Reddy
SACN secretariat

References

Maki M and Collin P (1997). Coeliac disease. *Lancet* 1997; 349: 1755-59.

Janatuinen EK, et al (2002). No harm from five year ingestion of oats in celiac disease. *Gut* **50**; 332-335

