

# An investigation into the prevalence, parental attitudes, and practices of plant-based diets in a sample of toddlers aged 1–3 years in Ireland

A. Goff Stuart<sup>1</sup>, J.L. O'Neill<sup>2</sup>, K. O'Connor<sup>2</sup>, M. Redmond<sup>2</sup> and J. Hovey<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland and

<sup>2</sup>Danone Nutricia Specialised Nutrition, Dublin, Ireland.

Early childhood is a well-recognised critical period that is characterised by rapid growth and development<sup>(1)</sup>. Parental feeding practices and nutritional knowledge are important agents in determining a child's dietary behaviour, with dietary practices being heavily influenced by a parents' own perceptions and attitudes<sup>(1)</sup>. In parallel with increased public awareness of the health and environmental benefits of consuming a plant based (PB) diet<sup>(2)</sup>, it can be acknowledged that a number of Irish individuals are following a PB lifestyle<sup>(2)</sup>. The Bord Bia Dietary Lifestyle Report (2021) found that 8% of the Irish population adhere to a vegetarian diet, while 2% follow a vegan diet<sup>(2)</sup>. Traditionally, PB diets include fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, beans and pulses and exclude animal-derived foods in different amounts<sup>(3)</sup>. PB diets are defined on the basis of their exclusion, with vegan diets being the most extreme form<sup>(3)</sup>. According to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) food-based dietary guidelines for 1-5-year-old children (2020), PB diets are appropriate for young children, however it is advised that parents seek advice from a dietitian before embarking on any type of vegetarian diet for their child<sup>(1)</sup>. The main objective of this study is to assess the prevalence of PB diets among Irish toddlers aged 1-3- years and to further investigate parental motivation and criteria when choosing a PB diet for their toddler. A 20-item questionnaire was sent to a sample of parents with a child aged 1-3-years, recruited by the independent website Everymum.ie. Descriptive statistics was performed using IBM SPSS 28 to calculate percentages and frequencies. Of the 922 participants, 57% were aged 35-44 years and 83% had achieved tertiary education. The mean toddler age was 1.63 years (standard deviation = 0.65). A PB diet was adopted by 7% (n = 63) of the toddlers included in the study, with 68% (n = 43) of their parents also being PB. Over half (52%, n = 33) of the PB toddlers practiced a diet that excludes meat and fish but includes dairy and eggs, while 13% (n = 8) followed a vegan diet. The decision to exclude animal foods from a toddler's diet was made for various reasons, with health benefits being the most common (71%, n = 45) and a further 18% (n = 11) citing their toddlers' food preferences. Furthermore, only 57% (n = 36) of the parents with PB toddlers reported to obtain dietary advice from healthcare professionals. The majority (94%, n = 59) of parents with PB toddlers felt their toddler had a healthy diet, with 67% (n = 42) of these parents being aware of the FSAI dietary guidelines. In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that PB diets are followed by some toddlers in Ireland, however further research is needed to assess the quality of these diets to ensure that recommended daily intakes are being met.

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## References

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