



## An investigation into the current weaning practices in Ireland

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The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) guidelines advise commencing weaning around 26 weeks, but no earlier than 17 weeks or later than 26 weeks<sup>(1)</sup>. The guidelines also state not to introduce cow's milk (CM) as the main milk drink (MMD) before 12 months of age. However, full-fat pasteurised CM may be used in small amounts when preparing weaning foods before 12 months. Previous Irish research highlights high rates of non-compliance with guidelines surrounding the timing of weaning<sup>(2),(3)</sup>. However, recent research is lacking. Furthermore, the introduction of CM before 12 months is under-researched. The objective of this study was to provide an updated synopsis of compliance with weaning guidelines set by the FSAI.<sup>(1)</sup>

Data were collected using a 15-item questionnaire. Parents of infants aged 0–15 months born healthy full-term were recruited via 'Everymum.ie', Irish family resource centres and Facebook parenting groups/pages. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS 28. Categorical variables were described as frequencies and percentages. Relationships between categorical variables were examined using contingency tables. Pearson Chi-Square tests were used to determine statistical significance (p value of <0.05).

Among 794 total participants, 73% were aged 30–39 years. Ninety-one percent were educated to tertiary level. Thirty-six percent exclusively breastfed until the commencement of weaning. Of those who had commenced or finished weaning (n = 562), 75% began weaning between 17–26 weeks. Six percent commenced weaning at ≤16 weeks. The remaining 19% began weaning at ≥27 weeks. Weaning at ≤16 weeks was associated with exclusive formula feeding from birth (p = 0.001), primary/secondary level education only (p = 0.022), and parent age of 19–29 and 35–39 years (p < 0.001). Exclusive breastfeeding from birth (p = 0.001) was associated with weaning at ≥27 weeks. Information on weaning was frequently sourced from healthcare professionals (30%, n = 381), online (29%, n = 363) and family/friends (23%, n = 294). Signs of readiness (44%, n = 406) and recommended age to commence weaning (36%, n = 329) were reported as the main reasons for commencing weaning. Of all parents (n = 792), 4% gave CM as a drink to their infant before 12 months of age. Of this, 48% (n = 15) introduced CM as the MMD, while 52% (n = 16) gave CM as an additional drink to the

MMD. Advice from a healthcare professional was most selected as the reason for introducing CM as a drink before 12 months (42%, n = 13).

A sizeable proportion of this sample were non-compliant with weaning guidelines. As HCPs were commonly used as a source of information, it is essential that they remain up-to-date on the latest guidelines through regular training. Further research into weaning practices in Ireland appears necessary to allow for a greater understanding of the situations in which parents shape their practices on when/how to wean their infant. Such research is vital to inform the development of effective interventions.

### Acknowledgments

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### References

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