Littlest Consumers Doing Well, Nutrition-wise

By Ruth Kava — September 27, 2016

Amid the scary stories about how the nation’s food supply is doomed because of commercial agriculture’s use of GMOs and various supposedly deadly chemicals, there’s a piece of good news. The littlest among us seem to be doing pretty well, as far as their nutrient intake goes. If our soils were so badly depleted as some organic proponents have claimed, we should be seeing lots of malnutrition among the smallest and most vulnerable in our population. But that’s not what some investigators have discovered.

A team led by Dr. Namanjeet Ahluwalia from the CDC analyzed data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) taken from 2009 - 2012. They focused on infants aged 6-11 months, and toddlers aged 12-23 months. Using information from parents and guardians, they compared the kids' intake of various nutrients to the DRIs (Dietary Reference Intakes) for the appropriate age groups. The DRIs include the EAR — the Estimated Average Requirement — and the AI — Adequate Intake. The AI is used if there are not sufficient or reliable enough data to calculate an EAR.

With respect to the macronutrients — fat, carbohydrate, and protein — average intakes of infants met the AI for carbs and fat, and for protein, 95 percent of them met the EAR. For toddlers, about 25 percent needed to increase their fat consumption (especially the essential linoleic acid), while over 95 percent met the EAR for protein and carbohydrates.

The micronutrients — vitamins and minerals — were more of a mixed bag. The great majority of infants met the AIs for vitamins and minerals. For iron and zinc, however, 10 and 5 percent respectively had intakes below those AIs. And intake of pre-formed (not from beta-carotene) vitamin A and zinc was actually higher than the recommended levels (21 and 61 percent, respectively). Almost all the toddlers met their EARs for vitamins with the exceptions of vitamins D
and E — 74 and 82 percent respectively were below the EARs for these vitamins.

The authors concluded: "[F]or the most part usual nutrient intakes were adequate for most US infants and toddlers compared to the recommendations with a few exceptions." Considering that intakes from vitamins and mineral supplements were not included (and according to the authors about 14 percent of children are given such supplements), we should look on the results of this analysis a good news. The challenge is to maintain these or better levels of intakes as the children continue to grow and develop.


1. EAR: the average daily intake level estimated to meet the requirement of half of the healthy individuals in a particular life stage and gender group — a measure of adequacy of intake for that nutrient and population.

2. AI: a recommended daily average daily nutrient intake level based on observed or experimentally determined approximations of estimates of nutrient intake by a group or groups of apparently healthy people.


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