

SUPPORTING MOTHERS FOR A HEALTHY START TO LIFE

The recent *Growing Up in New Zealand* research showing only 3% of pregnant women eat the recommended servings of foods across all food groups made headlines – but didn't surprise many. While rates between each food group were quite varied, with 21% meeting the recommendations for meat/eggs, 27% for fruit and vegetable, and 58% for milk products, overall the results were consistent with other earlier studies and the results for non-pregnant women.

However, the research also showed clear variances between ethnicities, showing the importance of eating patterns and family influences over other socioeconomic characteristics, and in its conclusion, said the results also showed women lack knowledge about “the specific benefits of a more nutritious diet during pregnancy” and need more support¹.

These results re-affirm the direction of the new Gravida Healthy Start Workforce Project that is already under development. For the past six months, in partnership with the NZ College of Midwives, Plunket, Tipu Ora and the Heart Foundation, Gravida has been developing two new education programmes for maternity and child health care professionals. The aim is to increase their confidence in supporting mothers with nutrition knowledge and skills and physical activity advice.

The programmes are intended to extend other successful kaupapa and training opportunities already in place for midwives, Plunket nurses and Well Child Tamariki Ora providers, and are based on evidence from the research field of the Developmental Origins of Health & Disease (DOHaD). Explained in detail at the ANA “It Starts with Us” national conference in May 2013 by Sir Peter Gluckman, DOHaD research notes that nutrition, breastfeeding duration and physical activity all contribute to developmental changes during preconception, pregnancy and infant years, in part through changes in gene activity. These changes can then have a long term impact on a child's later health and non-communicable disease (NCD) risk (i.e. diabetes, heart disease, obesity, allergies).

Godfrey et al.² suggest that up to 30% of the risk for developing NCDs in adulthood may originate in a baby's nutritional environment before birth. This level of risk can then be added to in the first infant years. DOHaD research

also emphasises the importance of a new mother's own health, noting that similar risks for later-in-life disease result for her too, from the same factors.

The two new workforce programmes were proposed by Gravida and its partners and awarded funding under a wider RFP called by the Ministry of Health in December 2012. The first programme, known as the *Healthy Start Education Programme*, will cover the new and updated scientific concepts, providing background about “why” people should care about healthy eating and physical activity at this time of their lives, as well as translation of current MOH guidelines.

The second programme acknowledges that simply giving women this information won't work. The information must fit with their cultural or family situation and come from their community or close relationships. Midwives, Plunket and Tamariki Ora nurses hold special, central and trusted relationships with families in this time and can make a huge difference if supported with the right communication tools. The *Healthy Conversations Skills Training Programme*, originally from Southampton³, reinforces and supports health practitioners to create more opportunities to listen and discuss health behaviours with mothers and families. Techniques include open discovery questions that lead to better understanding of their cultural or family situation and setting goals that reflect a family's multivariable issues.

“The aim of the project is to create every day knowledge, tools and resources that help our workforces partner with mothers and families to face really difficult subjects, such as a mother's weight during pregnancy, how to eat healthily and utilising food and meals they can afford,” says NZ College of Midwives CE Karen Guilliland. “Helping mothers and families understand the importance of this time and what they can do to contribute to giving their babies a healthy start is hugely rewarding for our workforces. Our relationships mean we're really uniquely placed to offer this help and intervene with the support of other professionals.”

Both programmes will be launched in 2015, with pre-registrations opened later this year. To find out more visit www.gravida.org.nz/healthystartworkforce 

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