Young children are eating too many calories and missing out on key vitamins

15:41, 5 Apr 201

**Researchers urged parents to follow guidelines on giving children supplements to boost levels of iron and vitamin D**

**YOUNG children are eating too many calories and too much salt and are missing out on key vitamins, experts have warned.**

High intake of protein and too many calories overall puts youngsters at risk of obesity, while too much salt could “set taste preference for the future” and put them at risk of high blood pressure and strokes in later life.

Researchers also urged parents to follow guidelines on giving children up to the age of five supplements to boost levels of iron and vitamin D, after their study found youngsters were woefully lacking in essential vitamins.

The study examined data for 2,336 children from one of the UK’s largest dietary datasets for toddlers.

With obesity levels in the UK on a par with those in Ireland, the study offers insight into how bad eating habits are instilled in youngsters from an early age.

Parents of the 21-month-olds filled in three-day food diaries and researchers from University College London analysed the results.

They found that average daily calorie intake “significantly exceeded” the recommended amount of 968 calories, with 63 per cent of children having too many and consuming an average of 1,035.

They warned that over the long term, eating too many calories would lead to obesity.

Protein intake among almost all children was nearly three times higher (40g) than the recommended 15g, while fibre intake was 8g — half the recommended amount.

Most children (84 per cent) did not meet the recommended amount of seven to 8.5 micrograms of Vitamin D a day, with the average intake being just 2.3 micrograms a day.

Only 30 per cent of children got enough iron (recommended to be 6.9 micrograms per day). Meanwhile, almost all children (99 per cent) had more salt than the 0.5g daily recommended, with many children having three times too much.

A lack of iron can cause heart and lung problems and increase the risk of illness and infection.

Vitamin D occurs naturally in only a few foods, such as oily fish and eggs, and is added to some items like fat spreads and breakfast cereals.

Most people get vitamin D from sunshine but experts have warned that the tendency to put sunscreen on children at all times in sunny weather means they are missing out.

Vitamin D helps regulate the amount of calcium and phosphate in the body and a lack of vitamin D can lead to bone deformities such as rickets in children.

Hayley Syrad, from UCL’s department of epidemiology and health, said: “Parents need more guidance on the appropriate type, amount and variety of foods and beverages.”