Children aged under five eating too many calories increasing risk of obesity says study

* 00:01, 6 APR 2016
* **BY** [ANDREW GREGORY](http://www.mirror.co.uk/authors/andrew-gregory/)

University College London study also found under fives eat too much salt and miss out on vitamins

Children under the age of five are eating too many calories, too much salt and missing out on vitamins, experts have warned.

High intake of protein and too many calories overall raises their 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 Government guidelines on giving children up to the age of five supplements to boost levels of iron and [vitamin D](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/vitamin-d).

Their study found youngsters were woefully lacking in essential [vitamins](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/vitamins).

The study, published in the British Journal of Nutrition, examined data for 2,336 children from one of the UK’s largest dietary datasets for toddlers, the Gemini twin birth cohort.

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

They found that average daily calorie intake “significantly exceeded” the recommended amount of 968 calories, with 63% 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.

Vitamin D intake, including the small number of children (7%) already given supplements, was less than half that recommended by the Department of Health. Most children (84%) did not meet the recommended amount of seven to 8.5 micrograms a day, with the average intake being just 2.3 micrograms a day.

Only 30% of children got enough iron (recommended to be 6.9 micrograms per day). Meanwhile, almost all children (99%) had more salt than the 0.5g daily recommended by the Department of Health, 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.

The Government recommends that all children aged six months to five years should take a daily vitamin supplement containing vitamins A, C and D.

In 2013, England’s chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, said the Government would consider giving all under-fives free vitamins due to rising fears about vitamin deficiency.

Only low-income families currently qualify for free vitamins.

Hayley Syrad, from UCL’s department of epidemiology and health, said: “The research suggests that the current diets of young children in England are a cause for concern.

“We know that dietary preferences and habits are established during the first two years of life and that what we eat in early life can have an enduring impact on our health.”

She added: “Parents need more guidance on the appropriate type, amount and variety of foods and beverages, together with appropriate micronutrient supplementation in order to reduce obesity and other health problems that may affect their children.”

Professor Neena Modi, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said: “Just last week it was reported that more than one in 10 men and one in seven women across the globe are obese. So to learn that at 21 months, 63% of UK children exceed the recommended daily intake of calories and large numbers exceed the recommended daily intake of protein and sodium, the future looks no better for the next generation of adults.

“There is no silver bullet when it comes to tackling obesity, but what is known is that the healthier start children have, the more likely they are to continue on that trajectory through their life.”