

From the Chief Medical Officer  
Dr Michael McBride



Department of  
**Health, Social Services  
and Public Safety**

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AN ROINN  
**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta  
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

MÁNNYSTRIE O  
**Poustie, Resydènter Heisin  
an Fowk Siccar**

HSS(MD)38/2009

To:

General Practitioners  
Medical Directors of HSC Trusts *for onward  
cascade to Consultant Paediatricians*  
Directors of Nursing of HSC Trusts *for onward  
cascade to Midwives and Health Visitors*  
Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency  
Allied Health Professionals at Public Health Agency  
Head of Dietetics in HSC Trusts  
Director of Public Health and Medical Director of Public  
Health Agency and Health and Social Care Board  
Chief Executive of RQIA *for cascade to Private Hospitals  
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Your Ref:  
Our Ref: HSS(MD)38/2009  
Date: 1 September 2009

Dear Colleague

## **REVISED GOVERNMENT ADVICE ON PEANUT CONSUMPTION DURING EARLY LIFE AND ALLERGY RISK**

You will wish to be aware that, following a major review of the scientific evidence surrounding maternal and infant consumption/avoidance of peanut and the early life risks of developing peanut allergy, the UK Departments of Health have revised their advice to consumers and health professionals. The updated advice will be included within general advice given to mothers about pregnancy and development of their baby. It will also feature in the next edition of the 'Pregnancy' and 'Birth to Five' books.

Previously, precautionary advice issued by the Department was that where anyone in a child's immediate family had a known allergy, mothers may wish to avoid eating peanuts during pregnancy, whilst breastfeeding, and to delay introducing peanut into the diet of these children until 3 years of age.

However, recent studies have questioned whether dietary avoidance of peanut is necessarily the best strategy for allergy prevention. A review of the evidence by the Committee on Toxicity (COT) has shown that there is no clear evidence that eating or not eating peanuts (or foods containing peanuts) during these early life stages influences the changes of a child developing a peanut allergy. The COT concluded that the previous dietary recommendations are no longer appropriate because of a shift in the evidence base.

The revised advice to consumers and health professionals is based on the latest scientific evidence and is being issued jointly by the Departments of Health and the Food Standards Agency – this is summarised in the Box below:

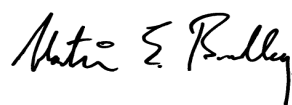
- **During Pregnancy and whilst breastfeeding:** The revised advice states that if mothers would like to eat peanuts or foods containing peanuts during pregnancy or breastfeeding, then they can choose to do so as part of a healthy balanced diet, irrespective of whether their child has a family history of allergies
- **When introducing peanut into a child's diet:** General advice is that all mothers should try to exclusively breastfeed their baby for the first 6 months of life. The revised advice states that if mothers choose to start giving their baby solid foods before 6 months of age, they should not introduce peanuts or other allergenic foods (such as other nuts, seeds, milk, eggs, wheat, fish or shellfish) before this time, and when they do, these foods should be introduced one at a time so that they can spot any allergic reaction.

The revised advice additionally advises that where a child already has another kind of allergy (e.g. diagnosed eczema or a diagnosed allergy to foods other than peanut), or if there is a history of allergy in the child's immediate family (parents, siblings), then mothers should talk to their GP, health visitor or medical allergy specialist before giving peanut to the child for the first time, because these children are at higher risk of developing peanut allergy.

The full text of the revised advice, which was trialled with health professionals and consumers from across the UK prior to issue, is available on the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) website at <http://www.food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/peanutspregnancy> and through the DH website at <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/Children/Maternity/Maternalandinfantnutrition/index.htm>. Details of the evidence base used to inform the COT review are available from the COT Statement, which is available at <http://cot.food.gov.uk/cotstatements/cotstatementsyrs/cotstatements2008/cot200807peanut>.

There is ongoing research on food allergy and intolerance being undertaken by the FSA, and this will inform future advice in relation to allergy risks. More details of this research can be found at: <http://www.food.gov.uk/science/research/researchinfo/foodcomponentsresearch/allergyresearch/>

Yours sincerely


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Chief Nursing Officer

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