

Fears over iron deficiency in children

Iron in the diet is important because it helps the body to produce, among other things, haemoglobin - a prime component of red blood cells which carry oxygen around the body to supply its tissues.

A national study found that 27% of a mixed group of eight-month-old infants had haemoglobin values below healthy levels.

A 2002 study of three-year-olds in the South West found that many of them also had iron intakes well below the recommended level.

While the most easily absorbed form of iron is found in meat, certain vegetables are a good source, and it is perfectly possible to exceed recommended intake levels on a completely vegetarian diet.

Cow's milk is not a good source of iron - "follow-on" milk which is fortified with iron is recommended by some for infants aged above six months.

A survey of 700 parents carried out on behalf of baby milk formula and food manufacturer Cow and Gate suggested that 77% of parents were unaware of any long-term health risks from iron deficiency.

One in five thought that a pint of cow's milk was a better source of iron than a pint of "follow-on" milk or a small portion of red meat.

Nearly half of those questioned thought wrongly that fish fingers were a good source.

Dr James Parker, from Cow and Gate, said: "At around six months, the natural stores of iron passed to babies in the womb are running low, so it is essential that they are replaced.

"This can be achieved through a healthy, balanced diet, but it is clear that many infants are not getting a sufficient amount of iron from their diet.

"For infants up to one year old, red meat and fortified cereals are good sources of iron."