First Foods and Gut Microbes

The establishment of the human gut microbiota in early life has been associated with later health and disease. During the first months after birth, the microbial composition in the gut is known to be affected by the mode of delivery, use of antibiotics, geographical location and type of feeding (breast/formula). Consequently, the neonatal period and early infancy has attracted much attention. However, after this first period the gut microbial composition continues to develop until the age of 3 years, and these 1st years have been designated “a window of opportunity” for microbial modulation. The beginning and end of this window is currently debated, but it likely coincides with the complementary feeding period, marking the gradual transition from milk-based infant feeding to family diet usually occurring between 6 and 24 months. Furthermore, the ‘first 1000 days,’ i.e., the period from conception until age 2 years, are generally recognized to be of particular importance for the healthy development of children. While dietary changes are known to affect the adult gut microbiota, there is a gap in our knowledge on how the introduction of new dietary components into the diet of infants/young children affects the gut microbiota development. This perspective paper summarizes the currently very few studies addressing the effects of complementary diet on gut microbiota, and highlights the recent finding that transition to family foods greatly impacts the development of gut microbial diversity. Further, we discuss potential impacts on child health and the need for further studies on this important topic.

General information
Publication status: Published
Organisations: National Food Institute, Research Group for Gut Microbiology and Immunology, Copenhagen Center for Health Technology, University of Copenhagen
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Number of pages: 8
Publication date: 2017
Peer-reviewed: Yes

Publication information
Journal: Frontiers in Microbiology
Volume: 8
Article number: 356
ISSN (Print): 1664-302X
Ratings:
BFI (2017): BFI-level 1
Scopus rating (2017): CiteScore 4.19 SJR 1.699 SNIP 1.201
Web of Science (2017): Impact factor 4.019
Web of Science (2017): Indexed yes
Original language: English
Keywords: infant gut microbiota, breast feeding, weaning, gut microbial diversity, complementary diet, transition, SKOT cohorts, family foods
Electronic versions:
fmicb_08_00356.pdf
DOIs:
10.3389/fmicb.2017.00356
Source: FindIt
Source ID: 2355542971

Research output: Contribution to journal › Journal article – Annual report year: 2017 › Research › peer-review