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## Letter to the Editor

# Weaning: a prospective investigation into the reality of USL Umbria 1

Sir,

Weaning represents a critical stage in a child's development, yet it is frequently surrounded by uncertainty-especially among first-time parents.<sup>1,2</sup> Such doubts often stem from limited awareness and an abundance of unfiltered information available online.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, informal exchanges among new parents can further complicate matters.<sup>4,5</sup> To evaluate the real level of parental knowledge on weaning, we conducted a survey at

the USL Umbria 1 and the University Hospital of Perugia. Our investigation focused on assessing both the information acquired during antenatal courses and the availability of dedicated resources where parents can seek expert advice on weaning.<sup>6</sup>

An anonymous and concise questionnaire was distributed on a voluntary basis to all patients at the aforementioned facilities. The responses were recorded electronically and later processed for analysis (Table 1 for the questionnaire).

**Table 1: Questionnaire on weaning practices.**

Question no.	Question	Response options
1	Age	<20 - 20-40 - >40
2	Nationality	(Open-ended)
3	Qualifications	None, high school diploma, professional qualification, graduate
4	Number of pregnancies	- 1 - 2 - 3 - >3
5	What is meant by "weaning"?	(Open-ended; e.g., "transition to a more varied diet that includes solid foods in addition to milk")
6	Where did you get previous information regarding weaning practices in your older babies (if you have them)?	(Open-ended)
7	Are you aware of the existence of post-partum courses in which the specific topic of weaning is addressed also through community and experiential events?	- Yes - No
8	If so, did you attend them?	- Yes - No
9	If you knew about it, would you attend?	- Yes - No
10	Are you aware of the WHO guidelines recommended for weaning?	- Yes - No
11	Do you know what age the WHO guidelines recommend starting weaning? Start from which month? Which fruit or which baby food?	(Open-ended)
12	At what age do you think it is best to start introducing the first solid foods?	(Open-ended)
13	Do you know the age at which the WHO guidelines recommend continuing breastfeeding? Possible answers mentioned. Until completion of two years. Until completion of three years. Up to completion of three years	(Open-ended /multiple choice from listed options)
14	What type of weaning model would you choose for your baby?	The one indicated by the pediatrician. The medicalized one. The spontaneous weaning
15	Which figure do you think is the most appropriate to assist you and your baby during weaning?	Midwife, Pediatrician, General practitioner

**Table 2: Answer per each question.**

Questions	N (%)
<b>Question n°1</b>	
31-40	1136 (43%)
21-30	1030 (39%)
<20	237 (9%)
>40	237 (9%)
<b>Question n°2</b>	
Italian	2350 (89%)
Others (Moldavia, Ecuadorian, Rumanian)	290 (11%)
<b>Question n°3</b>	
High school diploma	1215 (46%)
Degree	818 (31%)
Lower middle school diploma	343 (13%)
Professional qualification	264 (10%)
<b>Question n°4</b>	
1 <sup>st</sup>	2376 (90%)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	132 (5%)
3 <sup>rd</sup>	79 (3%)
>3 <sup>rd</sup>	53 (2%)
<b>Question n°5</b>	
The transition from an exclusively milk-based diet to one which includes, in addition to it, the introduction of solid foods.	1690 (64%)
It is the replacement of milk with solid foods	607 (23%)
I don't know	343 (13%)
<b>Question n°7</b>	
No	1875 (71%)
Some	501 (19%)
Yes	264 (10%)
<b>Question n°8</b>	
No	2270 (86%)
Some	238 (9%)
Yes	132 (5%)
<b>Question n°9</b>	
Yes	2482 (94%)
No	158 (6%)
<b>Question n°10</b>	
6 months	1479 (56%)
9 months	607 (23%)
3 months	554 (21%)
<b>Question n°11</b>	
Fruit and baby fruit	2006 (76%)
I don't know	422 (16%)
Any food	212 (8%)
<b>Question n°12</b>	
Yes	2455 (93%)
No	185 (7%)
<b>Question n°13</b>	
1 year	1875 (71%)
2 years	660 (25%)
3 years	105 (4%)
<b>Question n°14</b>	
Recommended by pediatrician	1821 (69%)
Traditional weaning	608 (23%)
Complementary feeding	211 (8%)

Continued.

Questions	N (%)
<b>Question n°15</b>	
Pediatrician	2032 (77%)
Midwife	607 (23%)
Gynecologist	0 (0%)
General practitioner	0 (0%)

We targeted pregnant women participating in the birth support courses organized by the University Hospital of Perugia and the consultants of USL Umbria 1. Our hypothesis was that women who value prenatal education would be more likely to seek reliable postnatal guidance regarding weaning.<sup>7</sup>

The survey, conducted from November 2017 to November 2023, included a sample of 2,640 subjects aged approximately 20 to 40 years. The results, summarized in Table 2, reveal significant gaps in the current Umbrian approach to neonatal weaning. These shortcomings appear to be linked to a near-total absence of dedicated courses and information campaigns on this subject.

### **Proposed solutions**

#### *Birth support courses*

Guidelines from the national collaborating centre for women's and children's health recommend that pregnant women be offered comprehensive prenatal education-including written materials-ideally beginning in the second trimester. A suggested structure includes 10 sessions from the 24th week of pregnancy and at least one session after birth. Enhancing maternal health literacy through such programs is vital; however, at present, there is no service specifically dedicated to weaning where parents can discuss their concerns.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Enhanced role of the midwife*

Ministerial Decree No. 740 (14 September 1994) defines the professional profile of the midwife, whose role in healthcare facilities (public or private) should complement that of the paediatrician in guiding the weaning process. Expanding the midwife's involvement in neonatal care programs could provide critical support for the newborn's physiological adaptation to extrauterine life and its growth up to one year.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Public awareness campaigns*

Integrating weaning support into socially beneficial advertising campaigns could increase public awareness. Promoting the availability of reliable weaning resources through all available channels is essential to inform and support new parents.

#### *Midwife services in pharmacies*

Establishing the presence of midwives in non-clinical settings, such as pharmacies, could significantly broaden access to weaning support. This approach would be especially beneficial for families residing in remote areas, ensuring that they receive preliminary guidance even if they are far from hospitals or specialized consultation centers.<sup>10</sup>

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