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Infant hunger and satiety cues during the first two years of life: Developmental changes of within meal signalling

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Overfeeding in infancy may lead to overweight and obesity in later childhood. Mothers are advised to “tune in” to their infant’s hunger, appetite and satiation cues to prevent overfeeding. The present study aimed to 1) assess stability and change in infant hunger and satiety cues (first two years of life) taken at six monthly intervals; 2) track the expression of appetite cues during the course of a meal (beginning, middle and end). Thirty-eight women (mean age 35.3+ 3.7 years) participated in the study. Mothers were within a normal weight range (BMI=22 + 3.3 kg/m^2), most were married (N= 35; 95%) and for most this was not their first child. After an initial investigation (T1) follow-up visits took place every six months with filmed meals involving solid foods. A typical meal contained foods high in protein and carbohydrate plus cooked vegetables. Films were viewed and communication cues (engagement indicating appetite and disengagement indicating satiation) identified and recorded by appearance using the NCAST (Nursing Child Assessment Satellite Training). Coding included the frequency and time at which each cue appeared. Results showed that infants were more likely to communicate potent engagement cues such as babbling, mutual gaze and looking at mother with age. None of the disengagement cues showed any significant main effects of time of follow up. Most, not all, feeding cues were stable across the segment of the feed and did not show a simple linear change across the meal, rather this appeared to develop with age. Raising awareness of these cues with mothers may encourage more responsive and positive mealtime interactions.