Nearly half of Singaporean parents surveyed say their children are picky eaters

Study sheds light on local prevalence of picky eating and feeding difficulties among children aged 1 to 10 years and the emotional impact on parents or caregivers

Singapore, 22 November 2012 – The Department of Paediatrics, National University Hospital (NUH) and Abbott Nutrition today announced results from a survey conducted with Singaporean parents to determine the key aspects of picky eating and feeding difficulties among children aged one to 10 years. The survey, conducted with 407 Singaporean parents and caregivers, revealed that nearly half the respondents consider their children to be picky eaters. This is the first such study conducted in Asia and the paper was published in the Asia Pacific Family Medicine journal.

Many Singaporean parents consider their children to be picky eaters, with almost half of the survey respondents reporting that their child was either ‘all the time’ (25.1%) or ‘sometimes’ (24.1%) a picky eater.1 When aided with a list of 12 typical behaviors related to picky eating such as throwing tantrums during mealtimes and a preference for drinks over food (refer to Appendix), the respondent-reported prevalence of picky eating or feeding difficulties occurring ‘all the time’ increased to 49.6%.1

Respondents who thought their child was a picky eater also tend to perceive the child as less energetic or healthy. Nearly half the respondents reported that they were ‘very much concerned’ that their child was a picky eater.1 They were also worried about their child’s physical and mental development.1

Parents and caregivers surveyed also reported that dealing with their picky eating children often led to significant stress and anxiety, and in some cases, had a negative impact on family relationships.

Associate Professor Daniel Goh, Head of the Department of Paediatrics at NUH, said, “It is clear that many parents are struggling with their child’s picky eating behaviors as well as feeding difficulties. Its impact on family relationships is another important
reason to evaluate and manage this problem. The fact that one-third of the respondents had consulted their doctors about their child’s eating behaviors suggests that most parents are concerned about picky eating. Feeding problems should be part of a routine evaluation of every child and all healthcare practitioners should adequately screen and manage this in the routine clinic consultation.”

The study results highlight that picky eating is an issue that can affect the entire family as mealtimes are a communal activity in most homes. On top of that, picky eaters may run the risk of nutritional deficiencies that may impact on growth and cognitive development. Experts say there are coping strategies that can help parents manage the problem and make mealtimes an enjoyable experience rather than a stressful one.

“Given the long-term implications of picky eating and the associated negative impact on caregiver stress and relationships, it is important that parents are able to identify such behaviors and seek help early,” added Associate Professor Goh, who is also the Head of Division of Paediatric Pulmonary and Sleep.

**About the survey**

407 parents and grandparents of children in Singapore aged one to 10 years old took part in the survey from May to June 2012. The survey aimed to determine the local prevalence of perceived picky eating/feeding difficulties; parents’ and caregivers’ understanding of feeding difficulties; how parents and caregivers handle feeding difficulties; factors that influence feeding difficulties; and impact of feeding difficulties on the children and family relationships.

**Results from the survey**

- Almost half of respondents reported that their child was either ‘all the time’ (25.1%) or ‘sometimes’ (24.1%) a picky eater. When aided with a list of 12 typical behaviors related to picky eating and feeding difficulties, such as throwing tantrums during mealtimes and preferring drinks to food (refer to Appendix), the respondent-reported prevalence of picky eating or feeding difficulties occurring ‘all the time’ increased to 49.6%.
In children aged three to 10 years, children whose parents are professionals and children with a family history of picky eating were also more likely to be picky eaters.¹

The survey also showed that picky eating can be a persistent problem; the mean duration of picky eating was reported to be 0.6 years in a one-year-old child, 1.1 years in a three-year-old, 3.0 years in a six-year-old and 4.8 years in a 10-year-old.¹

Methods for coping with picky eating included modifying the texture of food to make it easy to eat (65.6%), allowing television viewing at mealtimes (62.4%) and presenting food in an age-appropriate manner (52.8%).¹

Picky eating was found to add stress to caregivers during feeding time, with 10 of the 12 aforementioned picky eating behaviors occurring ‘all the time’. These behaviors were also significantly associated with respondents’ reports of stress during feeding. Nine of the 12 behaviors occurring ‘all the time’ were significantly associated with a negative impact on family relationships.¹

About the Khoo Teck Puat - National University Children’s Medical Institute (KTP-NUCMI)
The KTP-NUCMI is the paediatric arm of the National University Hospital (NUH) in Singapore, and comprises the Departments of Paediatrics, Paediatric Surgery and Neonatology. It houses the national paediatric liver and kidney transplant programmes as well as the chronic renal replacement programme for children. It is a tertiary institution equipped to provide comprehensive and specialised medical and surgical services for newborns, children and adolescents. Through a generous gift from the estate of Tan Sri Khoo Teck Puat for the advancement of paediatric patient care, education and research, KTP-NUCMI is undergoing major expansion to further enhance its standing as an international centre of excellence in paediatric healthcare. NUH Kids is the brand of the KTP-NUCMI.
The National University Hospital Feeding and Nutrition Clinic

Children who are picky eaters can be assessed and screened at the National University Hospital (NUH) Feeding and Nutrition Clinic. The clinic screens children with any growth-related or nutritional problems, which may or may not be symptoms of chronic diseases. The one-stop centre is helmed by a multi-disciplinary feeding team that comprises of dieticians, speech therapists, child psychologists and paediatricians. The centre aims to optimise nutritional management and ensure ease of care for parents and caregivers. The team assesses the children, makes recommendations for diagnosis and management, and customises the treatment and therapy according to the needs of each child.

Picky eating is a fairly common complaint that parents have of their children. Whilst the majority of child picky eaters are otherwise "well", children with highly selective food choices may be at risk of specific nutrient deficiencies. In addition, some children with poor feeding, particularly if associated with poor growth, may also have underlying chronic medical conditions. The team at the NUH Feeding and Nutrition Clinic will be able to assess the reason for the picky eating, determine any related growth or nutritional problems, and recommend suitable treatment and management for the picky eater.

About Abbott Nutrition

For more than 85 years, Abbott Nutrition has been developing and marketing science-based nutritional products to support the growth, health and wellness of people of all ages. Internationally recognized brands include the Similac® brand of infant formulas; the Gain® brand of growing-up milks; the PediaSure® brand of complete and balanced nutrition for children; and the Ensure® brand of complete and balanced nutrition for adults.

The company is a leader in nutritional products clinically shown to address the distinct dietary needs of people with serious health conditions or special nutrient requirements, such as the Glucerna® brand of nutrition shakes and bars for people with diabetes.

About Abbott
Abbott is a global, broad-based health care company devoted to the discovery, development, manufacture and marketing of pharmaceuticals and medical products, including nutritionals, devices and diagnostics. The company employs approximately 91,000 people and markets its products in more than 130 countries.

Abbott’s news releases and other information are available on the company’s Web site at www.abbott.com.

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References
Appendix

List of picky eating behaviors

- Complain about what is served
- Refuse food especially vegetables/fruits
- Refuse food like meats
- Push, hide or throw food during mealtime
- Eats the same food for all the meals
- Accept only a few types of food
- Do not like to try new food
- Eat slowly or hold food in the mouth
- Eat sweets and fatty foods instead of healthy foods
- Eat snacks instead of meals
- Throw tantrums at mealtimes
- Prefer drinks to food

List of feeding difficulties behaviors

- Do not like the texture of certain foods
- Fear certain foods due to a bad experience previously
- Eat very little