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Media Release

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Experts warn parents of the risks of getting vegan diets wrong in young children

(Prague, 11 May, 2017) Experts at the 50th Annual Meeting of the European Society of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN) are today warning that young children who follow a vegan diet without medical and dietary advice carry the risk of a number of nutrient deficiencies, including vitamin B12, calcium, zinc and high quality protein, which can have potentially devastating health effects.

Studies have shown that children who follow a vegan diet are leaner and smaller than those children who consume meat or those who have vegetarian diets.

*"It is difficult to ensure a healthy and balanced vegan diet in young infants, and parents should understand the serious consequences of failing to follow advice regarding supplementation of the diet. The **risks of getting it wrong** can include irreversible cognitive damage and, in the extreme, death. Our advice is that if parents pursue a vegan diet for their child, they must seek and strictly follow medical and dietary advice to make sure their infant receives adequate nutrition. Both mother and infant should follow advice regarding supplementation"* advises Professor Mary Fewtrell, chairman of ESPGHAN's nutrition committee comments:

The biggest risk to vegan children is that of vitamin B12 deficiency. Foods derived from animals have been shown to be the only reliable source of vitamin B12 and a deficiency of the vitamin can have devastating effects. Vitamin B12 is essential to the creation of DNA, indispensable for the maintenance of the nervous system, and a lack of it can result in haematological and neurological disorders, causing damage in young children which can be irreversible.

Presenting to healthcare professionals at the ESPGHAN conference today, Professor Myriam Van Winckel said: "*The more restricted the diet of the child, the greater the risk of deficiency and this is by far highest in vegan children, but the risk does not stop there. Vegan mothers who breastfeed also need to be aware that their children can develop vitamin B12 deficiency between 2 and 12 months because of the lack of reserves in their body at birth, even if the mother is not showing any signs of deficiency herself."*

Infants on vegan diets are also at risk of protein and calcium malnutrition, a situation made worse because parents can be misled by milk supplements. Rice milk, almond milk and soy milk suggest that they are suitable substitutes for milk, but experts say these should be properly labelled as 'drinks', because their nutritional value is not comparable to milk. Maintaining healthy levels of calcium is important for ensuring lifelong normal bone density, and rickets has been found in toddlers on a calcium-deficient diet consuming large amounts of non-supplemented soy drink.

However, unlike vegan diets, varied lacto (ovo) vegetarian and semi-vegetarian diets are generally safe. Although long term follow-up studies are scarce, they do not show a detrimental effect of vegetarian diets in children but instead point to beneficial health outcomes compared to omnivore diets, such as favourable lipid profile, antioxidant status, dietary fiber intake as well as tendencies towards a lower risk of being overweight.

ENDS.

Notes to Editors
For further information, or to speak to an expert, please email media@espghan.org or call James M. Butcher at ESPGHAN's official press agency, Spink, on +44 (0) 1444 811 099.

About Professor Myriam Van Winckel
Myriam Van Winckel is head of paediatric gastroenterology at the University Hospital Ghent, Belgium. Her areas of interest include paediatric gastroenterology, hepatology and nutrition and parenteral nutrition and enteral feeding in children.

About Professor Mary Fewtrell
Mary Fewtrell is Professor of Paediatric Nutrition at University College London and specialises in the nutritional programming of bone health, body composition and obesity, human lactation and the design of infant formula, complementary feeding and the duration of exclusive breastfeeding, and infant growth and its association with later-life health. She is also the Chair of ESPGHAN's Nutrition Committee.

About ESPGHAN
The European Society for Paediatric Gastroenterology Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN) is a multi-professional organisation whose aim is to promote the health of children with special attention to the gastrointestinal tract, liver and nutritional status, through knowledge creation, the dissemination of science based information, the promotion of best practice in the delivery of care and the provision of high quality education for paediatric gastroenterology, hepatology and nutrition professionals in Europe and beyond. Find out more by visiting www.espghan.org

About the 50th Annual Meeting of ESPGHAN
The 50th Annual Meeting of ESPGHAN is taking place from Wednesday 10 to Saturday 13 May 2017, in Prague, Czech Republic.

Every year the ESPGHAN meeting attracts the key opinion leaders in the field of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition from across Europe and all five continents, turning it into the largest conference of its kind worldwide. The Annual Meeting attracts over 4,000 experts from over 100 countries, all operating in the fields of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition, turning it into the largest conference of its kind worldwide. This year the meeting has received a record number of 839 accepted abstracts.

References

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