Arizona babies take a bite out of research

'Guac and Grow' study investigates the impact of avocados on infant development

By Jessica Carpenter, ASU News
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Like many parents, Megan Rivas wants to give her 6-month-old daughter, Monroe, a healthy start, and one of the ways she's going about it could make a big difference for more than just her daughter.

Rivas is among dozens of parents across the Valley feeding their babies an unexpected research ingredient — avocados — as part of an Arizona State University College of Health Solutions study called Guac & Grow.

The pilot study looks at the effects of avocado consumption on infant motor skills, growth and gut microbiome — the ecosystem of bacteria that helps babies digest food and build immunity in the first years of their life.

Professor Corrie Whisner is conducting the study alongside Gissel Marquez Alcaraz, a postdoctoral scholar.

Avocados drew Whisner's interest because they're high in healthy fats and rich in fiber, vitamin K and potassium. Compared with other common fruits given to babies, like apples or bananas, she said the nutrient content of an avocado is vastly higher.

However, any long-term benefits have never been explored in babies. Guac & Grow is among the first studies to look at this age group.

"If we know what the impact is, we could give parents a recommendation for food to give their babies a head start," Whisner said. "More formally, the data we're collecting now could be used to inform infant nutritional guidelines in the future."

Much of a child's development happens in the first year, including determinants of lifelong health. Whisner pointed to growth charts as an example; a baby who jumps one

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percentile line in the first 12 months has higher odds of developing childhood obesity and metabolic disease as an adult.

“By intervening as early as infancy, you could potentially set children up on a positive health trajectory for the rest of their life,” Whisner said.

A little bit of avocado a day ...

“As a parent, there’s so much information out there about what’s good and what’s not,” Rivas said. “I want to make sure that she’s getting everything she needs and make it easier for me as a parent to say this is a great go-to food, if that’s what the research finds.”

At home, Rivas slices avocado into pieces for Monroe to pick up and try herself; so far, one of her favorite ways to eat it is blended with potato, garlic and parsley.

Other parents serve the avocados mashed, mixed with eggs or blended with other vegetables — any way to get their baby to eat it.

As the study’s project manager, Marquez Alcaraz works directly with the families through in-home visits.

She explained that the avocados are delivered every 16 days over six months. During the first three months, parents are asked to feed their babies a quarter of an avocado per day and then half an avocado for the last three months.

“The moms take a survey to gauge how they see their babies’ development,” Marquez Alcaraz said. “We then measure them and weigh them. We also use this machine called the Veggie Meter, which measures the carotenoids in the baby’s skin.”

She also collects the infants’ diapers, which she and student researchers use to analyze the microbial genes present in the infants’ digestive tract to get an idea of how avocados may be affecting digestive processes.

“The best thing we can do is learn to take care of ourselves,” Marquez Alcaraz said. “And so, if babies can start developing these really good microbiomes, that can set them up for hopefully long, healthy lives.”

Michelle Polk, another parent in the study, said avocados were one of the first “solid” foods she fed her two older sons. Now with her 9-month-old son, Boden, she sees the study as an opportunity to learn what effect that may have had.

“I think nutrition and what we eat is really important,” Polk said. “I see the difference in my own health and with my kids. To support a study that is showing the impacts of that is really rewarding.”

Not only do the participating families receive six months of free avocados, but each check-in also comes with gift bags that include diapers, wipes, toys and contrast cards. Families are also invited to social events to connect with fellow participants.

By providing these opportunities and resources throughout the study, Whisner and Marquez Alcaraz hope to help more Arizona families.

“It’s very easy for us to do,” Rivas said about participating. “If we know that she's going to get great benefits from it, that helps me as a parent feel like I'm doing a better job.”

Want to get involved?

Professor Corrie Whisner is in the process of recruiting an additional 100 babies to participate in the study.

For more information, visit the study’s screener website.

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Megan Rivas (right) served her son avocado as a baby. Now, she hopes her daughter, Monroe, can get the same benefits while contributing to research that could help other infants. Photo by ASU Health

Text image(s)



At home, Monroe is given sliced avocados to pick up and try herself. Photo by ASU Health



Monroe, 6 months old, feels the avocado texture while she eats. Photo by ASU Health



Boden, 9 months old, smiles with Gissel Marquez Alcaraz (right), the study's project manager, during an in-home visit.



Gissel Marquez Alcaraz (left), Michelle Polk (center) and Professor Corrie Whisner (right) weigh and measure Boden during an at-home visit.