

# Improving the nutritional quality of baby food

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Credit: Unsplash

A nutritional survey of baby food on sale in Europe has shown that a significant number of products contain high sugar levels that contradict World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations.

In collaboration with WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe), researchers from the University of Leeds' School of Food Science and Nutrition and the School of Medicine have developed a draft Nutrient

Profile Model for infants and [young children](#) aged from six to 36 months.

The draft Nutrient Profile Model aims to classify products that are intended for babies and toddlers, to guide changes to their composition and to ensure they are marketed appropriately—all to help promote a [healthy diet](#) for infants and young children.

The findings and recommendations for baby [food](#) promotion and composition from the draft Nutrient Profile Model are included in a WHO/Europe report launched today in Brussels.

The model sets composition thresholds for baby food products, including fats, sugar and salt, in line with WHO guidance.

Leeds researchers compared the Nutrient Profile Model against nutritional and food composition data from 2,641 baby food products from Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom (using 2016/2017 data), and a further 1,314 products in seven additional European countries (using 2018 data).

The study found that only about a third of products examined met all of the six main compositional thresholds proposed by the Nutrient Profile Model.

## **High sugar levels in baby food**

Of particular concern were high levels of sugar and the use of concentrated fruit juice or other sweetening agents. The study found on average, approximately one third of energy in baby foods surveyed came from total sugar.

The use of added sugars was widespread across products and many

contradict [WHO recommendations for sugar levels](#).

The amount of total sugar refers to all sugar contained in a product, this includes added sugar and naturally occurring sugar, such as those occurring in milk products and in certain foods' cellular structure.

Free sugar refers to sugar added by the manufacturer and can also include sugars naturally present in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit juices as well as sugars that are "released" from fruit or vegetable cellular structures when they are processed and pureed.

Added sugars and foods high in free sugar are often used in baby foods to make them more palatable or to mask a sour or bitter taste.

WHO's existing recommendations state that free sugars should contribute less than 10% of total energy intake for children and warn against the addition of free sugars to food for infants and young children. Total sugar in fruit purees marketed as baby food was found on average to be more than 70% of total energy.

## **Recommended improvements to commercial baby food**

Some of the recommendations in the WHO/Europe [report](#) for tackling high sugar content in baby food include:

- Fruit drinks and juices, confectionery and sweet snacks should not be marketed as suitable for infants and young children;
- Prohibit added sugars—including concentrated [fruit juice](#)—in all baby foods;
- Improve product labeling for total sugar and total fruit contents;
- Ban misleading labeling and claims relating to sugar contents or

product healthiness.

- Also that baby food should not be marketed as suitable for children under six months of age.

Dr. Jayne Hutchinson, one of the main authors of the report, from the Nutritional Epidemiology Group at Leeds' School of Food Science and Nutrition, said: "By introducing foods with [high sugar content](#) at such a young age, there are serious concerns about enhancing a taste preference for sweet foods.

"Responsible labeling and appropriate ingredients in baby food products could reduce conditioned liking for sweeter foods or foods high in fat, sugar and salt and help prevent subsequent health complications that can extend into adulthood."

"Our research highlights the challenges consumers face when selecting healthy baby food options. Packaging and product names are often misleading," added Dr. Diane Threapleton, another main author of the report and from the Leeds Institute of Cardiovascular and Metabolic Medicine.

She said: "Many parents and caregivers might not realize that savory or vegetable foods often still include sweet ingredients or that products claiming 'no added sugar' can still be extremely high in [sugar](#). Manufacturers and retailers could play a more positive role in helping consumers make the healthy choice for their children."

## Sustainable Development Goals

Professor Janet Cade, leader of the Nutritional Epidemiology Group at Leeds, said: "Understanding the composition of baby foods in Europe allows us to see the nutritional quality of foods being introduced to [babies](#) and toddlers in this region.

"The widespread use of added sugars in baby food products is concerning. The guidance offered by the report will hopefully encourage European governments to insist that food manufacturers reformulate their products to come in line with WHO recommendations."

"Good nutrition in infancy and early childhood remains key to ensuring optimal child growth and development, and to better health outcomes later in life—including the prevention of overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases—thereby making United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages much more achievable," said Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

The report calls for robust government action to support important WHO recommendations about healthy diets for infants and young children by ensuring companies that manufacture and distribute commercial baby foods are adhering to appropriate marketing practices and work to improve product formulation.

The report by the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe is available on their [website](#).

**More information:** WHO/Europe studies find baby foods are high in sugar and inappropriately marketed for babies:

[www.euro.who.int/en/media-cent ... -marketed-for-babies](http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-cent...-marketed-for-babies)

WHO recommendations for sugar levels: [www.who.int/nutrition/topics/c ... ementary\\_feeding/en/](http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/c...ementary_feeding/en/)

Provided by University of Leeds

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