

Marketing makes dubious claims about infant formulas

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Marketing claims made about the health benefits of infant formula and toddler milks aren't supported by science. Credit: Rudd Center

Marketing claims promote benefits of providing infant formula and toddler milks that are not supported by scientific evidence, yet 60% of

caregivers mistakenly believe these products provide nutrition not present in breastmilk, whole milk, or other healthy foods, according to a new paper published in *Maternal and Child Nutrition* from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut. Relatedly, caregivers who believe these unsupported claims are significantly more likely to serve infant formula and toddler milk to their children, despite [expert recommendations](#) that toddler milks are not necessary for toddlers and that breastmilk is superior to infant formula for infants up to 12 months.

Previous research has demonstrated continued widespread marketing of [infant formula](#) directly to U.S. consumers, including through television advertising, social media and other [digital marketing](#), product giveaways, and in-store marketing. Furthermore, advertising for toddler milks increased by 74% from 2011 to 2015. This marketing often promotes nutrition-related claims and other messages that imply benefits of infant formula over breastfeeding and toddler milks as a solution for picky eating.

"Common claims in infant formula and toddler milk marketing are not supported by [scientific evidence](#), but they mislead parents to purchase these products, believing that they provide benefits for their children's nutrition and development," said Jennifer Harris, Ph.D., MBA, a study author and senior research advisor, marketing initiatives, at the UConn Rudd Center. "Our study shows how the marketing for these products not only contradicts recommendations by [child nutrition](#) experts, but also confuses parents about the most nutritious options for their young children."

The study, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, used a cross-sectional online survey of 1,645 U.S. parents and other primary caregivers of infants and toddlers (6-36 months) to measure their agreement with common marketing claims on infant formula and toddler

milks, identify products they served their child, and assess the relationship between agreement with claims and whether they served the products to their child. The survey also assessed caregivers' agreement with [expert recommendations](#) on drinks to serve young children.

While 80% of participants agreed with expert recommendations to serve breastmilk to infants and plain [whole milk](#) to toddlers, a majority of participants also agreed with common marketing claims that compare infant formula favorably to breastmilk and toddler milks to healthy foods. Notably, caregivers with a college degree were more likely to agree with marketing claims and serve these products to their child, indicating perceptions of marketing claims were not due to lower levels of education or literacy.

Key findings include:

- 52% of infant caregivers surveyed agreed with the unsupported [claim](#) that infant formula can be better for babies' digestion and brain development than breastmilk, while 61% agreed with the unsupported claim that it can provide nutrition not present in breastmilk.
- 60% of toddler caregivers surveyed agreed with the unsupported claim that toddler milks provide nutrition toddlers do not get from other foods.
- Caregivers were confused about the difference between infant formula and toddler milk, with 11% of infant caregivers surveyed mistakenly serving a toddler milk product most often.
- The odds of caregivers serving formula to their infant increased by 45% with each point on the scale indicating agreement with infant formula marketing claims.
- For toddler caregivers, the odds of serving these products increased by 59% with each point on the scale for agreement with toddler milk marketing claims.

Study authors and U.S. health experts call for regulation of marketing of infant formula and toddler milks, including improved product labeling and requirements that all claims be substantiated by scientific evidence. Internationally, the [World Health Organization's International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes](#) calls on companies to discontinue all marketing of these products directly to consumers.

In a new brief from Healthy Eating Research, researchers further outline policy opportunities to address harmful marketing practices, such as stricter FDA requirements for claims and nutrition content of all food and drinks intended for children under age 3. In addition, healthcare professionals and the public health community have the opportunity to more clearly communicate that infant formula and toddler milk have no advantages over breastmilk and plain milk for infants and young children.

Nutrition experts remind parents that breastfeeding is best and advise caregivers against the use of toddler milks. "Caregivers' confusion about the difference between infant [formula](#) and toddler milks raises significant concerns. Even though the packages look similar, it can be dangerous to serve toddler milk to [infants](#) because the ingredients don't meet their nutritional requirements," says Maria Romo-Palafox, Ph.D., lead author of the study, previous postdoctoral fellow at the UConn Rudd Center and current assistant professor at St. Louis University. "In addition, because of the added sugar in [toddler](#) milks, serving them can make it even more difficult for caregivers to get their toddlers to eat healthy."

More information: Infant formula and toddler milk marketing and caregiver's provision to young children, *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, doi.org/10.1111/mcn.12962

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