

Household foods get less healthy as babies age into toddlers

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Over the first few years of a child's life, foods found in a family's fridge

and cupboards tends to get less healthy, new research shows.

"We found significant changes in several food categories over time," said study lead author [Jennifer Barton](#). "Food items such as non-whole grains, processed meats, savory snacks, candy and microwavable or quick-cook foods were more commonly available in the home at 48 months [of age] compared to 24 and 36 months."

The study, which tracked foods in the homes of 468 [mother-child pairs](#) in Illinois, was published recently in the journal [Public Health Nutrition](#).

Barton is an assistant research professor at Pennsylvania State University, but she conducted the research while at the University of Illinois' College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, in Urbana.

According to Barton, "it's important to understand how the environments that children are in can influence their [diet and nutrition](#). What types of foods and beverages are available in the home, and how accessible are those items for the [young child](#)?"

Tracking the availability of various foods in the homes of the study participants, Barton's group used a standard checklist called the Home Food Inventory to see what kids could access at 2, 3 and 4 years of age.

All of the participants were taking part in an ongoing UI research project tracking the nutrition of children from infancy to the age of 10. They focused on each food's "obesogenic score," applied to toddler-age children. That score assesses how much a particular food adds to a child's chances of becoming obese.

They found that between ages of 2 and 4, the overall obesogenic score of foods in the average child's home went up.

"It makes sense that as children get older, the presence of more energy-dense and high-fat foods tends to grow," Barton said in a university news release. "Children may request these foods more often, and outside influences, such as the opinions of peers, are starting to become more apparent."

There were more cookies, chips, candy, processed meats, microwaved foods and other such fare available to kids as time went on.

"I do want to point out that we found some [positive changes](#)," Barton stressed. For example, "vegetables also become more available in the home at 48 months," she said.

She said that parents don't need to beat themselves up if there's a box of cookies or hot dogs in the kitchen.

"The point is not to label certain foods as being good or bad," she said. "We likely all have [food items](#) in our home that are not 'recommended.' It's really about trying to make sure that we get enough nutritious, recommended foods and eat the non-recommended items in moderation."

Barton also believes that, in today's society, kids and parents alike are under lots of pressure to eat less healthily.

"There are complex factors affecting parents' decisions," she said. "Children may ask for certain foods, which may stem from the influence of media and advertising. We should also consider who else lives in the home such as siblings, and the parents may experience work demands and financial stressors that can spill over into their family life."

On top of that, people in some neighborhoods may find their budgets are stretched too thin to buy a full range of [nutritious food](#), or they may live

far from food stores offering such foods.

"I believe we need a food systems approach to ensure people have access to nutritious food and that parents feel supported in making decisions to promote the health and well-being of themselves and their children," Barton said.

More information: Find out more about recommended nutrition for toddlers at the [USDA's MyPlate page](#).

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