

Australian study reveals the 'wild west' of baby and toddler food marketing

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A [study](#) of baby and toddler foods on supermarket shelves across Australia has revealed a staggering number of unregulated claims that mislead parents into thinking these often sugar-loaded products are

healthy.

The findings, published in *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, showed that none of the products for children aged 6–36 months met international guidelines for promotion and more than three quarters failed on overall nutritional requirements, mainly due to [excess energy](#) and sugar.

Lead author Dr. Elizabeth Dunford, Research Fellow at The George Institute for Global Health, said that consuming excess calories in early years sets children up for obesity in later life and the early introduction of highly sweetened foods drives lifelong taste preferences.

"Time-poor parents are looking for convenience, but most would be shocked by industry's deceptive marketing tactics suggesting products are healthier than they are, that are rife across this category," she said. "They would probably also be surprised to know that regulatory safeguards to protect children from exposure to unhealthy food marketing are currently very limited."

Information on 309 infant and toddler food products held in The George Institute's FoodSwitch database was assessed against the WHO Regional Office for Europe's Nutrient and Promotion Profile Model (NPPM), published in 2022 and considered a gold standard benchmark.

George Institute researchers found that only just over a fifth of the products (22%) met all WHO criteria for nutrient composition—most failing on sugar and calorie content—and none met the 'no prohibited claims' requirement. Prohibited claims include statements like, "free from colors and flavors," "organic" and "no added sugar."

"We found the average number of prohibited claims in this category was 5.6—in one case, we saw 21 different prohibited claims on a single product," added Dr. Dunford. "Pouches, which account for half of

commercial infant food sales and are growing exponentially, had the greatest number of prohibited claims at an average of 5.8 per package."

An estimated one in four children are overweight or obese. Australian Infant Feeding Guidelines state that 'consumption of nutrient-poor foods with high levels of fat/ saturated fat, sugar, and/or salt should be avoided or limited' and that no sugars should be added to food for children under 12 months of age.

Dr. Daisy Coyle, dietitian and Research Fellow at The George Institute said that the use of health and nutrition content claims and wellness messaging on infant and toddler foods that are probably, in fact, unhealthy was concerning.

"These claims are commonly used on unhealthy products and can contribute to a 'health halo' effect, leading consumers to believe they are healthy," she said.

"And all too often we see products highlight what they don't have, such as 'no gluten,' or 'no additives,' rather than what they do contain such as high levels of added sugars."

Responding to concerns about the steep rise in chronic disease related to overweight and obesity, Food Ministers launched a public consultation into improving commercial foods for infants and children in Australia and New Zealand in August, with submissions closing September 13th, 2024.

Potential regulatory actions are being considered, including reviewing appropriate claims use and restricting the number of claims permitted on the pack, priorities that are supported by this study.

"We know these claims and messages influence what parents buy for

infants and toddlers in the critical early years. The [food industry](#) is essentially setting the foundations for unhealthy eating later in life and this situation urgently requires regulation," Dr. Coyle added.

"We'd want to see a more comprehensive approach to addressing key drivers of chronic disease from infancy. The long-term health of future generations depends on it."

More information: Elizabeth K. Dunford et al, Commercially-produced infant and toddler foods—How healthy are they? An evaluation of products sold in Australian supermarkets, *Maternal & Child Nutrition* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/mcn.13709](https://doi.org/10.1111/mcn.13709)

Provided by George Institute for Global Health

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