

Most baby foods in US grocery stores are unhealthy, study shows

August 21 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A staggering 60% of infant and toddler foods fail to meet nutritional recommendations, and none meet promotional requirements set by World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, according to new

research published today in the journal *Nutrients*.

In the absence of US-specific nutrition or promotional guidelines for these foods, researchers at The George Institute for Global Health assessed data on 651 infant and toddler food products sold in the top ten US grocery chains held in the Institute's FoodSwitch database against this international benchmark.

Among all products, 70% failed to meet protein requirements and 44% exceeded total sugar requirements. A further one in four products did not meet calorie requirements, and one in five exceeded recommended sodium limits.

Dr. Elizabeth Dunford, Research Fellow at The George Institute, and Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Nutrition at the University of North Carolina said that the rising popularity of processed convenience foods for infants and young children was concerning.

"Early childhood is a crucial period of rapid growth and when taste preferences and [dietary habits](#) form, potentially paving the way for the development of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes and some cancers later in life," she said.

"Time-poor parents are increasingly choosing convenience foods, unaware that many of these products lack key nutrients needed for their child's development and tricked into believing they are healthier than they really are."

Researchers found that baby food pouches are the fastest growing products in the sector, with a 900% increase in the proportion of sales deriving from pouches in the last 13 years. Concerningly, pouches ranked among the unhealthiest products assessed, with fewer than 7% meeting total sugar recommendations.*

The study also revealed the extent of misleading marketing practices, with almost all (99.4%) products featuring at least one prohibited claim on their packaging. On average, products displayed four prohibited claims, with some displaying as many as 11. Common claims included "non genetically modified (GM)" (70%), "organic" (59%), "no BPA" (37%), and "no artificial colors/flavors" (25%).

Dr. Daisy Coyle, Research Fellow and Dietitian at The George Institute said that claims like these create a "health halo" around these products, stating, "The lack of regulation in this area leaves the door wide open for the [food industry](#) to deceive busy parents. We saw this not only in the use of misleading claims but also in the use of misleading names, where the product name did not reflect the main ingredients found on the ingredient list. For example, snack and finger foods often referred to fruit or vegetables in the product name, despite primarily being made of flour or other starches."

Obesity in children aged two to five has more than doubled in the US since the 1970s, with approximately 13% of preschool children living with obesity. This has only worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.

"While reducing [childhood obesity](#) was a priority under the Obama administration, the issue appears to have fallen by the wayside in recent years," added Dr. Dunford. "Our findings highlight the urgent need for better regulation and guidance in the infant and toddler foods market in the United States—the health of future generations depends on it."

Update 08/21/2024: *This represents 7 percent of all pouches, but fruit-based pouches (which contain the most sugar) aren't included in the WHO criteria. This figure becomes 69% if fruit-base pouches are excluded.

More information: An Evaluation of the Nutritional and Promotional

Profile of Commercial Foods for Infants and Toddlers in the United States, *Nutrients* (2024). [DOI: 10.3390/nu16160000](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu16160000)

Provided by George Institute for Global Health

Citation: Most baby foods in US grocery stores are unhealthy, study shows (2024, August 21) retrieved 21 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-08-baby-foods-grocery-unhealthy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.