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Baby Food FACTS

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Birth to two years is a critical period for developing healthy food preferences and eating habits and preventing childhood obesity. Baby Food FACTS provides a comprehensive analysis of the nutritional content of food and drink products marketed to parents for their babies and toddlers (up to age 3), the messages used to promote these products, and how well the marketing messages correspond with expert advice about feeding young children.

The research

This report analyzed companies spending \$100,000 or more in total advertising in 2015 and documented changes in advertising over the past five years. In 2015, companies spent \$77 million to advertise baby and toddler food, infant formula, toddler milk (also known as toddler “formula”), and nutritional supplements for young children. Eight brands from three companies were responsible for 99 percent of advertising spending. Four additional baby and toddler food brands spent \$100,000 or more in advertising in magazines and online, including **Plum Organics** (Campbell Soup Company), **Beech-Nut** (Hero A.G.), and **Happy Baby** and **Happy Tot** (Nurture Inc.).

Key findings

Positive findings

- 100 percent of all fruit, vegetable, and meal products offered by all baby and toddler food brands qualified as nutritious.
- Beech-Nut and Gerber marketed their baby food products in a way that supported most expert recommendations on best practices for feeding infants.
- Traditional advertising spending (primarily on TV and magazines) by infant formula brands declined substantially—from more than \$30 million in 2011 to less than \$10 million in 2015.

Opportunities for improvement

- Infant formula brands had the most internet advertising and were most active in social media and on mom blogs.
- Nearly 60 percent of advertising dollars promoted products that are not recommended for young children, including sugar-sweetened toddler drinks and nutritionally poor snack food.

Three companies were responsible for 99% of ad spending

99%

Nestlé

- Gerber
- Gerber Graduates
- Gerber Good Start
- Nido

Abbott

- Pediasure • Similac

MeadJohnson Nutrition

- Enfagrow • Enfamil



Infant formula

Marketing:

- All package labels featured claims that linked nutrients and ingredients in infant formula (e.g., DHA, lutein, probiotics) to children’s development, including brain and eye health, milestones like grasping and walking, and less crying.
- Most advertising promoted specialty formulas that are higher in price than traditional formulas, including Gerber Good Start and Soothe and Similac Sensitive.
- Gerber Good Start ads focused on supporting babies’ digestive health, and Similac and Enfamil highlighted their products’ advantages for babies’ mental development.

Expert recommendations:

- Marketing messages should not imply that infant formula offers developmental advantages over breastmilk.
- Breastmilk is the optimal choice for infants under six months, and, also optimally, breastfeeding should continue through at least 12 months.^{1,2}
- Most infants do not need more expensive specialty formulas.³



Infant formula packages had, on average, 5.9 nutrition and 3.1 child development messages.

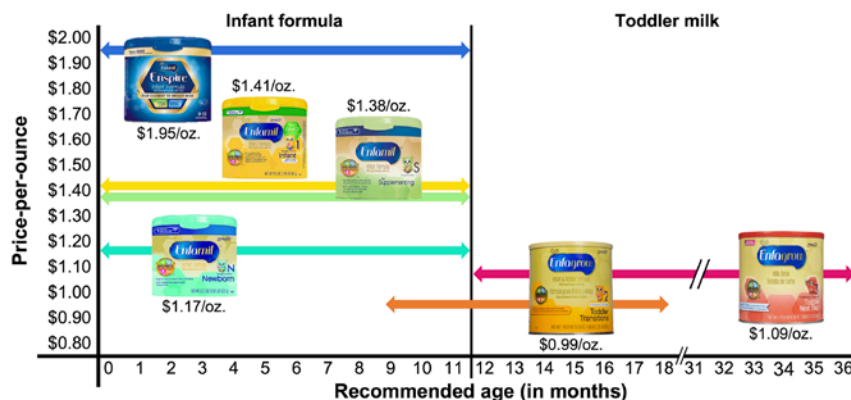
Toddler drinks

Nutrition:

- Toddler milk products including Enfagrow, Gerber Good Start Grow, Nido 1+, Similac Go & Grow, and Happy Tot Grow & Shine, contained added sweeteners, including sugar, glucose syrup solids, honey, and corn syrup solids.
- PediaSure Grow & Gain, a nutritional supplement aimed at toddlers, had 240 calories per serving and as much sugar as an 8-ounce sports drink.

Marketing:

- Enfagrow and Nido spent almost \$17 million in advertising for toddler milk products in 2015, 74 percent more than in 2011. PediaSure spent almost \$21 million – more than any other brand in our analysis.
- PediaSure, Enfagrow, and Nido toddler drinks were the only baby or toddler food or drink brands to advertise on Spanish-language TV in 2015.
- Marketing messages promoted these drinks as beneficial for children’s development, especially growth and mental performance, and a solution for picky eating.
- Multiple formulations of infant formula and toddler milk aimed at different ages and stages of development were packaged and branded similarly, raising concerns about potential consumer confusion.



Expert recommendations:

- Children under age two *should not* consume any foods or drinks with added sugars.⁴
- One to two-year-olds should drink whole milk, not toddler milk products. These products, are more expensive, and their advertised benefits are not supported by scientific evidence.⁵

Baby and toddler food and snacks

Nutrition:

- In contrast to nutritious baby and toddler fruit, vegetable, and meal products, just four of 80 baby and toddler snack foods, such as cookies, cereal bars, puffs, and fruit snacks, were nutritious choices for young children.
- Fifty percent of baby and 83 percent of toddler snacks contained added sugars.

Marketing:

- Snack food labels for both baby and toddler products featured more nutrition-related messages than other types of food: up to 9.5 messages on Plum Organics snack packages.



82% of Happy Tot and 56% of Plum Organics toddler food products are pureed and come in pouches.



- Toddler food products were often pureed food in pouch packages. Pureed food is not recommended for children older than one year.
- Product names did not match the ingredient lists for approximately one-quarter of baby food and more than 40 percent of toddler food products, which may mislead parents about the ingredients in these products.

Expert recommendations:

- Toddlers' diets should help them develop gross and fine motor skills and learn to enjoy the taste, flavors, and textures of real fruits and vegetables. By age two, toddlers should be eating the same food as the rest of the family.
- For all children, a healthy diet should include a variety of fruits and vegetables every day, and limited consumption of saturated fat and sodium. Children under two should not consume any food with added sugars.

Take action

The findings included in this report provide policymakers, health professionals, public health advocates, industry representatives, and parents an opportunity to address misinformation conveyed through marketing of baby and toddler food and drinks.

Manufacturers of food and drinks intended for babies and toddlers should support parents' efforts to raise healthy children.

- The World Health Organization (WHO) calls for no marketing of infant formula, toddler milk, or baby food for children under six months.⁶ The U.S. Congress should enact laws consistent with WHO provisions to address aggressive promotion of breastmilk substitutes, including infant formula and complementary foods.
- The U.S. Food and Drug Administration should issue final guidance on claims on infant formula packaging, including claims that compare infant formula to breastmilk, and also regulate claims on toddler milk packaging. The Federal Trade Commission should similarly regulate claims made in advertising.
- Pediatricians and health providers, especially those serving Hispanic communities, should be aware of the extensive marketing for sugar-sweetened toddler milk and nutritional supplement brands aimed at Latino parents.
- Advocates for children's health should help raise awareness about the marketing practices used to encourage purchases of baby and toddler food and drinks that do not support experts' recommendations for healthy eating and encourage action on these recommendations.
- The food industry should expand the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) self-regulatory program for improving food advertising to children to incorporate marketing of baby and toddler food and drinks.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. For more information, visit www.UConnRuddCenter.org.

Baby Food FACTS, funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides a comprehensive examination of the products and messages promoting food and drinks intended for infants and children younger than age three. For the full report and a complete list of recommendations, visit <http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/BabyFoodFACTS>

¹ World Health Organization and Pan American Health Organization (2001). Guiding Principles for Complementary Feeding of the Breastfed Child. Washington DC, USA.

² American Academy of Pediatrics (2012). Policy Statement. Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk. *Pediatrics*, 129(3), e827-e841.

³ O'Connor NR (2009). Infant Formula. *American Family Physician*, 79(7):565-570.

⁴ Vos MB, Kaar JL, Welsh JA, Van Horn LV, Feig DL, et al. (2016). Added sugars and cardiovascular disease risk in children. A scientific statement from the American Heart Association. *Circulation*, 134(15).

⁵ O'Connor NR (2009) and AAP (2011). Bright Futures Pocket Guide, 3rd ed. <https://brightfutures.aap.org/BrightFuturesDocuments/BFNutrition3rdEdPocketGuide.pdf>

⁶ WHO (1981). International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes. www.who.int/nutrition/publications/code_english.pdf and WHO (2016). Maternal, infant and young child nutrition Guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children. apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA69/A69_7Add1-en.pdf