

# Information for parents & caregivers

## Baby Food Study Research Summary



### WHAT WE DID

- 1** In the summer of 2024, we looked at 632 baby and toddler foods (sold as suitable under 3 years of age) available on the websites of the 5 largest UK retailers (Tesco, Sainsbury's, ASDA, Morrisons and Aldi).
- 2** We asked over 1000 parents about commercial (bought) baby foods such as how often they use them, reasons for choosing certain products, and what they think about what's on the pack (labelling and marketing).
- 3** We held discussion groups with parents in Leeds to get in-depth understanding of some of the issues around the use of bought baby and toddler foods.

## WHAT WE FOUND

**The baby food market is full of low-quality products that hide their poor nutrition with confusing names and packaging. This is disappointing for families who think these foods are healthy and well-regulated.**



### Sugar



Many products are high in sugar: 10% of baby/toddler food products were snacks with added sugar and a quarter of the market is made up of fruit purees/pouches with high levels of sugar.



Parents felt that added sugar is not needed in baby foods.

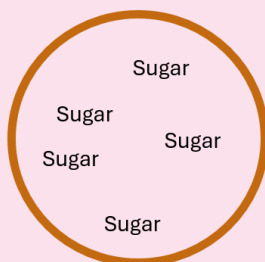


9 in 10 (89%) fruit products were high in sugar and would need a front-of-pack 'High Sugar' label according to new recommendations.  
Fruit products are not a balanced meal.

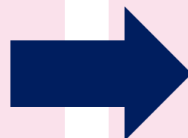
## 'NATURAL SUGAR' IS STILL SUGAR...

### WHOLE FOODS

Natural sugars are encased in fibrous plant cell walls

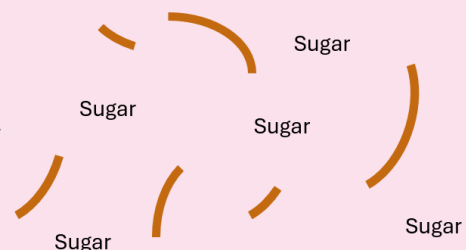


- Sugar is slowly digested/released
- Avoids exposure to sugar in the mouth
- Avoids blood glucose peaks



### PUREES

Cells are broken open and sugars released



- Rapidly digested → blood glucose spikes
- Sweeter taste → sets preferences for sugar
- Increased risk of tooth decay

## Meal Suitability



Many purees were too watery, providing less energy (calories) than a milk feed.



Fruit purees were especially unsuitable as a meal, often providing no (or low) protein or healthy fats.



21% (1 in 5) fruit products/meals were too watery, meaning they don't give the best nutrition.



## Weaning Advice



Many products aimed at first food introduction (early weaning) were sold as being suitable from 4 months. This goes against NHS advice to introduce foods around 6 months of age.



Having '4+ months' on the pack was confusing, making parents believe these foods are suitable to give from younger ages.



Parents supported a change on pack labelling to recommend foods from 6 months only.



## Price Vs Quality



Cheaper fruit pouches were higher in sugar, cheaper snack foods were higher in sugar and cheaper pouches (meals and fruit-based) were more watery.



Families shopping on a budget might be more likely to end up with low-quality products.



## Regulations



Baby food regulations (laws) are outdated and weak, with no limits on sugar content.



Parents were surprised to learn that there are no regulations for sugar in baby foods and supported calls to use labels on the front of packs to flag high sugar levels.





# Misleading Marketing

Families often rely on bought baby foods, using these most or some of the time. Parents trust these foods to be healthy, but brands often use misleading marketing.

Packs say:



'No added sugar' even when most of the calories are from sugar



The product is the 'perfect' way to feed your baby, undermining the suitability of simple home-prepared food



Use claims like 'Organic' and 'one of 5-a-day' which make parents think that the product is healthy so they don't question the nutrition

## WHAT'S NEXT...

**1** We are making recommendations to the government that strong regulations (laws) are needed to improve the nutrition and marketing (packaging and labelling) of bought baby foods. If you also feel strongly about this issue:

- Please write to your MP to let them know baby food regulation is weak and improvements are needed.

**2** Until laws are changed, we are making recommendations for retailers (supermarkets etc.) and manufacturers (including brands) on steps that they can take to make improvements.

**3** Though we believe regulation is needed and will be the best way to make lasting changes to improve baby foods, we have also made some 'Top Tips'. These will help parents and caregivers *now* to navigate the baby foods aisle and make better choices.

This work was carried out by Dr Diane Threapleton, Ali Morpeth and Prof Janet Cade at the University of Leeds. The work was funded by the Which? Fund and was additionally supported by Sustain.

# Tips for parents and caregivers of children aged under 3 years when choosing to use bought baby and toddler foods

Though we believe companies should be responsible for selling better products and not using misleading marketing tactics and that regulation is the only way to enforce this, there are some practical steps parents and caregivers can take when choosing commercial baby foods.

## TOP TIPS

- 1 Give your baby simple or home-prepared foods** if you can; porridge, natural yogurt, steamed vegetables, or softer/mashed versions of home cooked family meals can be a good place to start. See advice on introducing solid foods and meal ideas here:
  - [NHS Start for life](#)
  - [First Steps Nutrition](#)
- 2 Avoid frequent use and large portions of fruit-based products** as these will be high in sugar (look at the ingredients list to check fruit content).
- 3 Offer savoury foods and complete meals** such as without fruit but with dairy (milk, yoghurt), grains (wheat, rice), vegetables, legumes (beans, peas, lentils), meat or fish.
- 4 Avoid products with added sugars** including fruit juice and syrups.
- 5 Don't introduce foods before 6 months** unless you have been advised by a health professional.
- 6 Avoid snack products for babies under 12 months.**
- 7 Snacks for toddlers (12m+): avoid sweet and processed snacks** (biscuits, fruity chews, melty snacks) and **offer simple fresh foods or savoury snacks** (low-salt crackers or toast with nut butter/cream cheese, fresh fruit, vegetables and hummus).
- 8 Give small snack portions** so they don't displace meals.
- 9 Feed pureed food with a spoon – don't let babies drink from pouches.**
- 10 If you use puree products, move away from these once babies can handle more texture.** There is no need to use purees for older babies and toddlers who can chew.

# Tips for parents and caregivers of children aged under 3 years when choosing to use bought baby and toddler foods

SIMPLE SWAPS	If you usually use...	Try swapping to this...
<b>At breakfast</b>	Fruit-based pouches or jars (fruit puree, fruity yogurt, fruity baby porridge/rice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural yogurt</li> <li>• Fruit (whole, mashed or sliced)</li> <li>• Porridge/wheat biscuits</li> <li>• Wholegrain toast</li> </ul> <p>Top yogurt or porridge with mashed/sliced fruit or nut butter</p> <p>Top toast with butter, cream cheese or nut butter</p>
<b>Mealtimes</b>	Simple purees with a high fruit content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vegetable puree or soft/steamed vegetables</li> <li>• For more rounded nutrition offer several individual foods (soft if needed) or a mashed meal (e.g. with vegetables and dairy, egg, grains, beans/lentils, meat or fish)</li> </ul>
<b>Learning to chew</b>	Smooth purees in pouches or jars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with soft pieces of fruit, vegetables or other soft foods</li> <li>• Move on to more textured foods when babies are ready to manage these</li> </ul>
<b>Snacks for toddlers (12m+)</b>	Fruit chews/bars Sweet cereal bars Biscuits/rusks Low-texture 'melty' snacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pieces of fruit or vegetable sticks</li> <li>• Low salt crackers/savoury snacks</li> <li>• Wholegrain toast or oatcakes with nut butter, cream cheese, hummus etc.</li> </ul>



Make sure your baby or child is seated safely and always supervised.



Provide textures that are appropriate to your child's ability to chew, moving slowly towards more textured foods.