

Are infant/toddler commercial ready to eat foods in the UK market meeting the European Commission Directives for relevant nutrients?

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The composition of early infant diet may have a direct impact on metabolic pathways and health during adulthood⁽¹⁾. This has important public health consequences as poor diet is associated with chronic disease which is currently a major topic of concern for the UK population. Since early food exposures determine later life food and health choices⁽²⁾, it is crucial to ensure that products provided for our youngest consumers are at a gold standard of nutrition. The NHS Infant Feeding Survey of 2005 showed that 85% of mothers are most likely to introduce their babies to commercially prepared foods⁽³⁾. Concerns have been raised regarding the nutritional quality of commercially prepared baby foods; in particular sugar and salt have been under scrutiny in Canada⁽⁴⁾. Similar concerns have been raised in the UK but little research has dealt with this issue. The aim of our study was to investigate the nutritional content of commercially prepared baby foods for infants and toddlers in the UK and examine whether they met the regulations of the European Union Commission Directive 2006/125/EC⁽⁵⁾ on processed cereal based food and baby foods for infants and young children. A sub-objective was to investigate the number of ingredients in the products and to observe if any products contained any of sugar, salt, vitamins and corn flour as added ingredients.

All foods and drinks from the major infant and toddler foods except infant formulae and milks were selected ($n = 512$) and nutritional information retrieved from package labels and manufacturer's websites. The 6 brands investigated were: Heinz ($n = 108$), Cow & Gate ($n = 120$), Hipp Organic ($n = 125$), Organix ($n = 60$), Ella's Kitchen ($n = 42$) and Boots ($n = 57$) which are the main manufacturing brands in the UK. Quantities of seven nutrients were determined (protein, carbohydrate, sugar, fat, sodium, iron and calcium) using a classification based on cereal-based or non cereal-based groups as stated by the EC Directive and these were compared with regulation limits set in the Directive to determine whether products complied. Results found that 55 products were out with the regulations (11%). There were no concerns regarding the amount of protein, carbohydrate and iron in products. Only 3 products (0.5%) exceeded the fat regulations and 5 (1%) exceeded sodium regulations. Sugars and calcium were the major concerns as 9 (1.7%) products exceed maximum sugar limits and 36 (7%) products were out with calcium requirements according to the regulations. Organix were the only brand out of the 6 investigated to have all products within the EU regulations. The brands which added one or more of the extra ingredients investigated were Heinz, Cow & Gate, Hipp Organic and Boots. Relevant findings are that 14 (13%) Heinz products have added sugar and 2 (1.8%) have added salt. A large number of the Hipp Organic products contained added salt ($n = 43$, 34%) and 5 (4%) have added sugars. Cow & Gate products have vitamins and sugar added to 13 (11%) of their products. Eight (14%) of Boots' products contained sugars and 1 (1.7%) contained salt. We concluded that despite clear regulations and guarantees that these are closely monitored, infant and toddler weaning foods do not appear to be closely monitored as products exceeding regulation amounts are currently on sale in the UK market. Our results also raised concerns whether these 'added' ingredients are needed in these products, of special concern are added salt and sugar.

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