

Infant Formula

Although most doctors recommend breastfeeding for the first few months of a baby's life, many women choose infant formula as a full- or part-time option. For some, it is a matter of convenience. Others have experienced difficulty getting a sufficient amount of milk to their baby by breastfeeding. With so many types of baby formulas, it can be difficult to know which one to feed your baby.

How is the quality of infant formula controlled?

Infant formulas are liquids or reconstituted powders fed to infants as a substitute for breast milk. Infant formulas play an important role in the diets of infants because they are often their only source of nutrients. For this reason, the composition of commercial formulas is carefully controlled.

The FDA requires that these products meet very strict standards. In fact, there is a law (known as the Infant Formula Act) which gives the FDA special authority to create and enforce standards for commercial infant formulas. Manufacturers must analyze each batch of formula to check nutrient levels and make safety checks. They must also test samples to make sure the product remains in good condition while it is on the market shelf. Infant formulas must also have codes on their containers to identify each batch. Manufacturers must keep very detailed records of production and analysis.

Are homemade infant formulas safe?

The FDA regulates commercially available infant formulas but they do not regulate recipes for homemade formulas. Great care must be given to the decision to make infant formulas at home-safety should always be a prime concern. The potential problems associated with errors in selecting and combining ingredients for the formula are very serious, ranging from several nutritional imbalances to unsafe products that can harm infants. Because of these potentially serious health concerns, the FDA does not recommend that consumers make infant formulas at home.

Should I use bottled "baby water?"

In most situations, it is safe to mix powdered formula using ordinary cold tap water. However, you should first bring it to a boil and then boil for one minute, or as directed on the label of the infant formula. Some water companies make bottled waters that are marketed for infants and for use in mixing with infant formula.

When manufacturers label their water as intended for infants, the water must meet the same standards established for tap water by the Environmental Protection Agency. The label must also indicate that the bottled water is not sterile. As with tap water, consumers should boil bottled water one minute before mixing with infant formula. Powdered formula should always be mixed according to the label using the cleanest water, utensils and bottles and never watered down to make it last longer.

Cow milk or soy milk?

Most full-term infants should get a conventional cow's milk-based formula. However, if your baby is lactose intolerant, you may want to switch to a soy-based formula. Talk with your baby's pediatrician before you switch.

Symptoms that may indicate an adverse reaction to cow's milk protein include vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain and rash. With lactose intolerance, the most common symptoms are excessive gas, abdominal distension and pain and diarrhea. Since some of the symptoms overlap, a stool test may be necessary to determine the culprit. Usually, lactose intolerance will produce acidic stools that contain glucose. If the protein is the problem, stools will be non-acidic and have flecks of blood.

The main alternative to cow's milk formula is soy formula. About 20 percent of the formula sold in the United States is soy. Lactose intolerance is the biggest reason to change formulas. The carbohydrates in most soy formulas are sucrose and corn syrup, which are easily digested and absorbed by infants. However, soy is not as good a protein source as cow's milk. Also, babies do not absorb some minerals, such as calcium, as efficiently from soy formulas. Therefore, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Healthy full-term infants should be given soy formula only when medically necessary."

Iron

The infant formulas currently available in the United States are either "iron-fortified"-with approximately 12 milligrams of iron per liter-or "low iron"-with approximately two milligrams of iron per liter.

Studies have shown that school children fed iron-fortified formula performed better on a standardized developmental test than children with lower levels of iron. The FDA has permitted marketing of low-iron formulas because some pediatricians prefer to use them. Talk with your pediatrician about whether he or she recommends an iron fortified or low iron formula for your baby.

Resources

- Infant Nutrition Council of America: www.infantnutrition.org
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov

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