



## AAP: Babies should eat a varied diet to protect against heavy metals in commercial, homemade food

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The AAP is reiterating its call for swift, comprehensive federal regulation of heavy metals in foods that babies eat after a [new report](#) found these elements in both commercial and homemade baby foods.

In the meantime, families can reduce exposure by feeding babies a variety of foods, said AAP President Moira A. Szilagyi, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP.

“Eating many different foods is best for children’s overall nutrition and will also reduce the chance of your child consuming a higher concentration of heavy metals from any one food source,” Dr. Szilagyi said in a statement.

Heavy metals like lead, arsenic, mercury and cadmium can come from soil, water and industrial processes, according to AAP Committee on Nutrition Chair Mark R. Corkins, M.D., FASPEN, AGAF, FAAP. In high amounts, they can harm brain development and have been linked to learning and behavior problems. There is no known safe level of exposure.

In 2019, [Healthy Babies Bright Futures](#) (HBBF) found heavy metals in 95% of commercial baby foods it tested. As a follow-up, the group compared commercial baby foods to homemade baby foods by testing 288 foods and analyzing 7,000 additional tests from other studies. HBBF released its findings Thursday.

The data showed 94% of commercial baby food and 94% of homemade purees and family brands tested had detectable levels of heavy metals. Differences between a commercial baby food product and a homemade version of the same food typically were small.

“We didn’t find any evidence to suggest that homemade foods in general have lower heavy metals levels than store-bought baby foods,” said HBBF Research Director Jane Houlihan, M.S.C.S.

Houlihan said the report “is a cause for concern, not alarm.”

“There’s so many things parents can do that can make a difference day to day,” she said.

The most contaminated foods consumed by babies are rice cakes, crisped rice cereal, rice-based puffs, brown rice, rice-based teething biscuits, white rice, raisins, teething crackers (non-rice), granola bars with raisins and oat-ring cereal, according to the report.

The least contaminated are bananas, grits, baby food brand meats, butternut squash, lamb, apples, pork, eggs, oranges and watermelon.

Exposure to heavy metals may be greater for some children from racial or ethnic groups that have rice-heavy diets or for children from low-income families who are exposed to heavy metals from their environment.

HBBF included a chart in the report with recommendations on which foods to serve, limit and avoid. The group also echoed the AAP's call for babies to eat a variety of foods. Families also may want to vary the brands and stores they use. The report found some foods like sweet potatoes and carrots had vastly different levels of heavy metals based on where they were purchased. While buying organic products limits pesticides, it does not limit heavy metals.

Dr. Corkins stressed families should continue feeding their babies fruits and vegetables as they provide crucial nutrients, but they should wash them, peel those that can be peeled and use fresh or frozen produce. He also said it is possible to reduce arsenic in rice by draining some of the water instead of cooking the rice until all the water is absorbed.

In addition, parents can reduce children's heavy metal exposure by breastfeeding if possible, avoiding fruit juice, making healthy fish choices, addressing lead hazards in their home and not smoking or vaping, [according to HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org).

In 2020, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) set limits on [inorganic arsenic in infant rice cereal](#), and earlier this year it proposed [lower lead levels for juice](#). It also recently launched the [Closer to Zero initiative](#), which aims to lower the levels of arsenic, lead, cadmium and mercury in baby foods.

"We are grateful that FDA has begun its Closer to Zero initiative to address this problem, but their work needs to move more quickly and more comprehensively address *all* foods infants and toddlers eat," Dr. Szilagyi said.

The AAP has implored the FDA to ensure its approach is science-driven and takes into account potential unintended impacts on parents' ability to purchase safe, nutritious foods.

In its report, HBBF laid out steps for both the FDA and food manufacturers to reduce heavy metals.

"We know ... if the retailers insist that the companies they buy from are encouraging their growers to pay attention to heavy metals that things can change," said HBBF National Director Charlotte Brody, R.N. "And we know that when the FDA takes strong action, companies figure out how to meet the stronger protections, and we parents need to insist that the government and food suppliers pay attention to this problem and address it."

## Resources

- [Health Babies Bright Futures report and tip sheet](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on heavy metals in baby food](#)
- [Information from the FDA on its Closer to Zero plan to lower toxic elements in baby food](#)
- [Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units](#)