

Report reveals high levels of added sugar in US infant formula despite medical recommendations

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Researchers at the University of Kansas said parents have no way of knowing this nutritional information without their analyses because of lax regulation and labeling requirements for U.S. formulas. Credit: Vyacheslav Argenberg / Wikimedia Commons

Added sugar, derived from cheap crops like corn, is bad for babies.

[According to the American Heart Association](#), added sugars are full of energy but lack nutritional value, boosting odds of obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and other health problems.

But a [study](#) published today from the University of Kansas in the *Journal of Food Composition and Analysis* shows most [infant formulas](#) on the U.S. market contain primarily added sugars rather than the healthier, naturally occurring lactose found in cow-milk base that would be best for babies because it's closest to [human breast milk](#).

"Added sugars are contraindicated for infants and children under the age of 2—they're not supposed to have them," said lead author Audrey Rips-Goodwin, a KU undergraduate who headed the analysis from KU's Health Behavior and Technology Lab.

"Previous research has shown that some infant formulas contain added sugars. We sought to identify the best infant formulas available in 2022—those with the highest proportion of naturally occurring lactose. We found that only five out of 73 formulas tested contained from 70% to 90% naturally occurring lactose."

Senior author Tera Fazzino, associate professor of psychology and associate director of the Cofrin Logan Center for Addiction Research & Treatment at KU's Life Span Institute, said the study's data was a revelation because the Food and Drug Administration doesn't have nutritional requirements or labeling mandates for the [sugar](#) profile of formula marketed to American parents and caregivers.

"Most infant formulas on the U.S. market contained mostly added sugars," she said. "Standard formulas had over half of sugars from added

sugars, about 60%, whereas gentle and lactose-free formulas contained about 85% added sugars on average."

Fazzino said parents have no way of knowing this nutritional information without the KU analyses because of lax regulation and labeling requirements for U.S. formulas.

"The FDA stipulates that infant formulas must contain a specific proportion of calories from fats and proteins, but it does not regulate sources of carbohydrates," she said. "Because of this, formula companies can use any type of carbohydrate, including added sugars (e.g., corn syrup solids, fructose, glucose) and starches in their formulas."

The KU researchers said consumption of added sugars in infant formula also may prompt more preference for sweet tastes, which other scholarly work has shown could lead to overfeeding and higher chances for obesity and related chronic health problems later in life.

"Our infant formula market totally contradicts what experts in infant health recommend," Rips-Goodwin said.

While breast milk is universally recommended as preferable to formula, providing breast milk to babies isn't always possible for all mothers. Some mothers experience low milk supply, difficulty latching or painful conditions like mastitis. Other medications and medical conditions make breastfeeding impossible.

Past these reasons, Fazzino said societal barriers make provision of breast milk harder than necessary for many parents.

"We have a massive systemic issue where [parental leave](#) is nonexistent at the federal level and not required," she said. "This [lack of support](#) makes it especially difficult to breastfeed an infant, which is essentially a full-

time job for the first six months of life. There is extremely limited societal support for the early stages of infant and child care in general."

The KU team cited a lack of resources for breastfeeding, such as dedicated spaces in public areas. With few formula brands on the market free of unhealthy added sugars, parents are left in a bind, unable to provide breast milk or a nutritionally suitable formula.

"With no structural support in place, exclusively breastfeeding becomes very difficult, despite being widely promoted as the best option for infant health," Fazzino said.

"While breast milk is known to be beneficial for infants, the lack of systemic support means most parents end up using formula—either as a supplement or entirely. However, our findings suggest that infant formula itself may pose a significant risk to healthy infant development."

More information: Audrey R Rips-Goodwin et al, US Infant Formulas Contain Primarily Added Sugars: An Analysis of the Infant Formulas on the US Market, *Journal of Food Composition and Analysis* (2025). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jfca.2025.107369](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfca.2025.107369)

Provided by University of Kansas

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