

Heavy Metals in Baby Food



Heavy metals are naturally found in the environment and can enter many food and drinking products through growing or manufacturing processes. A 2019 study conducted by Healthy Babies Bright Futures, a national alliance of scientists and child health advocacy organizations, described amounts of arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury found in many U.S. manufactured baby foods.

While the presence of the heavy metals in baby food was not surprising, the levels in some products were higher than expected. Rice and rice-based puff products, teething biscuits, fruit drinks, and root vegetable products were found to have high amounts of metals.^{1,2} The study has led to increased scrutiny of the laws and procedures for the manufacturing and marketing of baby food.³

Is heavy metal exposure in baby food harmful to my child?

High levels of metal exposure can be harmful and should be minimized for developing infants and children. Exposure to high levels of heavy metals can be harmful to brain development and have also been linked to problems with learning, cognition, and behavior.¹

Are heavy metals in baby food harmful to my child?

Per the American Academy of Pediatrics, “the low levels of heavy metals found in baby foods likely are a relatively small part of a child’s overall toxic metal exposure risk. However, exposure from all sources should be minimized”.⁴ Other heavy metal exposures – such as from old water pipes, paint chips, cosmetics, spices, and secondhand smoke from regular cigarettes and e-cigarettes are potentially more concerning.

Is organic baby food better?

Organic baby foods may have lower levels of certain pesticides and other chemicals. However, since heavy metals are found in the soil and can get into prepared foods from processing, organic foods often contain similar levels of heavy metals as non-organic foods.^{2,5}

Have baby food products been removed from DoD commissaries?

Because the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not established a regulatory requirement for heavy metals in baby food, no recalls have been established. The DoD food protection enterprise will not initiate product recall actions or removals from DoD retail facilities unless a violation or recall is initiated.⁵

Will the DoD test for heavy metals in baby foods?

Because the FDA has not established any regulatory requirements, the DoD has no legal recourse to test for heavy metals in infant rice cereals or other baby food items at this time. In the future, if the FDA establishes regulatory requirements for heavy metals in baby food products, the DoD Food Analysis and Diagnostic Laboratory will institute a plan to conduct accredited testing of infant rice cereal and other baby food products.⁵

Should my baby be tested for heavy metal exposure?

Experts say there is no need to get children tested. Tests that look at a child’s hair for metal exposure also are not recommended, since this type of testing is scientifically unproven and often inaccurate.³

How can I reduce my baby’s exposure to heavy metals?

The best preventive actions parents can take to decrease their child’s heavy metal exposure is to identify and eliminate common sources of heavy metals in the home.¹⁻⁶

- Get your tap water tested.
- Ensure lead paint is not present or has been properly abated in older homes.
- Eliminate air and surface contamination by not smoking/vaping.

To further reduce heavy metal exposures, parents should ensure their infants and children eat a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, lean protein, and healthy fish foods, but should try to limit foods that have higher concentrations of heavy metals. To reduce children’s exposures to heavy metals in food products parents can.^{4,6}

- Choose rice-free packaged snacks (avoid rice cereal, rice milk and brown rice syrup, and especially brown rice as it tends to have the highest arsenic levels). Instead choose cereals and snacks that use oats/oatmeal, barley, couscous, quinoa, farro, and bulgur; or white, basmati, and sushi rice.

Where to find more information: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov, American Academy of Pediatrics www.aap.org, and National Institutes of Health www.nih.gov.



- Choose snacks with fewer contaminants recommended by Consumer Reports — apples, applesauce (unsweetened), bananas, barley with diced vegetables, beans, cheese, grapes (cut lengthwise), hard-boiled eggs, peaches, and yogurt.
- Use frozen fruit pieces like bananas or strawberries, instead of teething biscuits, to soothe sore gums.
- Offer filtered tap water, milk, or puree fruits instead of fruit juices.
- Wash fruits and vegetables in cool water before preparing and serving.
- Limit root vegetables like carrots and sweet potatoes that absorb more metals from the soil.
- Include weekly servings of seafood like light tuna (solid or chunk), salmon, cod, whitefish, and pollock, but consult the FDA's guidelines for best amounts of different seafood types (1 – 3 days per week; a serving is 1 ounce at age 2 and increases with age to 4 ounces by age 11) to minimize exposure to metals like mercury.
- Consider making your own baby food, though be aware that making your own baby food will not completely eliminate heavy metals from your child's diet. For information on making baby food, visit <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/Is-it-OK-to-make-my-own-baby-food.aspx>

1. "What's in my baby's food? Healthy Babies Bright Futures" (Investigation Report). Lead Authors - Jane Houlihan, Research Director and Charlotte Brody, National Director; October 2019, <https://www.healthymbabyfood.org/>
2. Beal, Judy A. 2020. Heavy Metals in Baby Food: What Providers and Parents Need to Know. *The American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing* 45(2):125. https://journals.lww.com/mcnjournal/Citation/2020/03000/Heavy_Metals_in_Baby_Food__What_Providers_and.9.aspx
3. Baby Foods Are Tainted with Dangerous Levels of Arsenic, Lead, Cadmium, and Mercury" (Staff Report), Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy, Committee on Oversight and Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, February 4, 2021. <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2021-02-04%20ECP%20Baby%20Food%20Staff%20Report.pdf>
4. "Heavy Metals in Baby Food." American Academy of Pediatrics. Last update 15 March 2021. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/feeding-nutrition/Pages/Metals-in-Baby-Food.aspx>
5. Department of the Air Force. Memo for MAJCOM PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICERS (21 February 2021). SUBJECT: Guidance for Child Development Centers (CDC) and Family Child Care (FCC) Reported Heavy Metals in Baby Food.
6. "Advice About Eating Fish For Women Who Are or Might Become Pregnant, Breastfeeding Mothers, and Young Children." FDA REVISED JULY 2019. <https://www.fda.gov/food/consumers/advice-about-eating-fish>

Where to find more information: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov, American Academy of Pediatrics www.aap.org, and National Institutes of Health www.nih.gov.

For more information, contact your installation's Department of Public Health.
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TA-645-JUL21

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