

ISSUE BRIEF:

HEAVY METALS IN BABY FOOD



The presence of heavy metals in baby foods is harmful to infant development and can impact a child's health into adulthood. Recently, the publication Consumer Reports completed a follow-up to a 2018 report detailing the presence of harmful metals in baby foods. This follow up study reveals that popular brands such as Earth's Best Organic, Organics Happy Baby, Beechnut Naturals, Gerber, and Baby Mum-Mum still contain worrisome levels of heavy metals including arsenic, cadmium, and lead in their baby food products.¹ Any presence of heavy metals in baby foods poses a threat to infant health, and further efforts should be taken to reduce this danger.

Health Consequences of Heavy Metal Consumption

Long-term consumption of baby foods contaminated with heavy metals, such as arsenic, lead, and cadmium, may impair the health and development of infants. Exposure to arsenic may cause harm to children's central nervous system and neurodevelopment; specifically, children may experience poor motor skills, impacted verbal capabilities, and weaker memory. Consumption of arsenic is linked to higher risk of bronchiectasis, impaired liver function, cognitive deficits, skin conditions, and skin cancer.² Lead has also been linked to cognitive deficits, and a prospective study has shown that cognitive impairment due to lead may persist from childhood into adulthood.³ Lead exposure may also cause stunted growth, delayed development and puberty, and behavioral issues.⁴ Cadmium has been found to lead to lower IQ scores and higher prevalence of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).⁵

Contamination of Food Products

Heavy metals can contaminate food products at many steps of the food production process. Some heavy metals are introduced through fertilizers and insecticides, while other heavy metals occur naturally in soil and are absorbed by plants.⁶ Runoff from roads, factories, and dumping grounds can also pollute water sources used for crops.⁷ In addition to the agricultural process, heavy metals can be introduced into food products through fortified vitamins and minerals that are added during the manufacturing process.⁸

Impact on Children

While heavy metals in food are also harmful to adults, babies and children are especially vulnerable to these toxins. Due to their smaller body weight and size, a small dose of any toxin can harm an infant.⁹ The presence of toxic heavy metals in baby food thus puts them at high risk of experiencing health consequences. Babies and toddlers are also at higher risk of harm due to consumption of heavy metals because their metabolic pathways are still developing, meaning their ability to metabolize toxins is weaker than that of an adult.¹⁰ Babies are still developing their organ systems, too, making them more vulnerable to heavy metals which tend to accumulate in the body.¹¹

Recent Reports and Developments

The presence of heavy metals in baby foods is a persistent issue. In 2021, the House Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy released two reports detailing the presence of harmful levels of toxic metals in baby foods sold by seven of the largest baby food producers in the United States.¹² The first report found that some companies sold baby foods despite testing for high levels of heavy metals, only tested food ingredients and not final products, or did not test for certain heavy metals.¹³ The second report found that other baby food companies had poor monitoring regulations, did not follow their own testing standards, or did not announce a recall of certain products despite testing for high levels of heavy metals.¹⁴ Earlier this year, a test by Bloomberg Law found that all but one of 33 baby food products contained at least two of three heavy metals: lead, arsenic, and cadmium.¹⁵

In response to this problem, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has developed the “Closer to Zero: Reducing Childhood Exposure to Contaminants from Foods” program.¹⁶ This program aims to lower dietary exposure to toxins to the lowest amount possible through research and analysis, regulation, consultation, and proposed limits for heavy metals in some baby foods. These limits are not enforceable, but the FDA may use the limits and other factors as the basis for enforcement action in specific cases.¹⁷ The FDA has also released draft guidance with action levels for lead present in food and is planning to publish action levels for arsenic, cadmium, and mercury after further research.¹⁸ However, these action levels are not legally enforceable.¹⁹

Policy Recommendations

To protect the health and well-being of the nation's infants and babies, First Focus on Children urges the FDA:

- **Set legally-enforceable limits for heavy metals in baby foods.** Enforcement of FDA limits will ensure that heavy metal contamination of food products is kept at lower levels.
- **Require farms to conduct soil testing and to use contaminated fields only for crops that do not absorb metals:** Soil testing and alternative usage of contaminated fields will reduce the production of crops with heavy metals. Crops that do not pick up heavy metals, such as beans, can be grown in contaminated fields, and thus reduce the amount of food with heavy metals available for commercial use and consumption.²⁰
- **Require food companies to test their ingredients and products and to enact a recall if testing reveals that their products surpass FDA limits:** Food companies can test crops for heavy metals, buy crops from regions with lower contamination levels, and test food products after they have

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been processed.²¹ More frequent testing at several steps of the food production process can help to reduce heavy metal concentration in baby foods. Requiring recalls will reduce the amount of contaminated baby foods available in the market.

While the FDA has made progress toward limiting heavy metals in baby food, dangerous levels of toxic heavy metals continue to contaminate many popular baby food products. Policymakers must continue working to develop enforceable limits and stricter testing protocols to protect the health, well-being and development of infants and young children.

Contact Information

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Endnotes

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