



GOVERNMENT URGED TO ACT AS ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS FOUND TO DOMINATE DIETS OF UK BABIES AND TODDLERS

Thursday 18th June: A new report released today exposes how ultra-processed foods (UPF) exist across all product categories on the baby food aisle, and among many foods marketed specifically at pre-school children. UPF are widely consumed, from the first weeks and months of life, raising serious concerns about infant and young child health.

These findings have been published by First Steps Nutrition Trust in the report '**Ultra-processed foods (UPF) in the diets of infants and young children in the UK: What they are, how they harm health, and what needs to be done to reduce intakes**'. This report sets out how UPF-rich diets from infancy are likely to be contributing to obesity and other negative health outcomes. Key findings in the report include:

- All commercial milk formulas are ultra-processed, and a high proportion of baby 'finger foods' (snacks) and baby cereals.
- The extent of ultra-processing is underestimated due to the need to review product labels for ingredients indicative of ultra-processing.
- By two to five years of age, UPFs account for nearly two thirds (61%) of the total mean energy intake of UK children – a higher proportion than their peers in the United States and Australia.
- A large and growing body of evidence now consistently links UPF-rich diets to a range of negative health outcomes – including obesity - from infancy through to adulthood.
- The mechanisms linking UPF-rich diets to a range of negative health outcomes include that; UPFs are typically high in fat, salt and sugar, promote overeating, disrupt developing taste preferences early in life, displace minimally and unprocessed foods, encourage unnecessary snacking, interfere with the healthy development of the gut microbiota, and have harmful effects due to contain certain additives and contaminants with known harmful effects.
- Aggressive and misleading marketing by the baby food industry is a key driver of high consumption levels.
- Despite ample evidence of the health and environmental harms of high levels of UPF consumption, the UK currently lacks a clear position on UPF; added to which efforts to reduce population-level consumption of high fat, salt, sugar foods inadvertently promote consumption of UPF.
- In contrast, at least 10 countries around the world have recently updated their national dietary guidance to try to reduce UPF consumption. Guidance from Brazil, Mexico, Israel and France includes specific recommendations to reduce UPF consumption among young children.

Dr Vicky Sibson, Director of First Steps Nutrition Trust, said:

"It is now commonplace that many babies and young children in the UK are being fed large amounts of ultra-processed foods from the start of their lives. There is robust evidence that this will be harmful to their health in the short and long term, including promoting excess weight gain.



The Government needs to do more to enable parents and carers to feed their children diets which support healthy growth and development - based on real foods - not dominated by commercial products marketed as 'good' choices.

A first step would be to explicitly address the extent to which food is processed in public health recommendations. At the same time action to curb inappropriate and misleading marketing by the baby food industry is long overdue. The Government also needs to invest meaningfully in the health visiting service and other facilities and benefits to ensure that all families can get the independent, expert advice, guidance and financial support they may need to feed their children healthy diets”.

Dr Chris Van Tulleken (author of ‘Ultra-Processed People’), said:

“We are in the middle of a child health emergency, with UK children heavier on average than in almost any other country.

Ultra-processed foods are strongly associated with weight gain, they also change children’s long-term food preferences and have a huge range of harmful effects on their bodies, including malnutrition and stunting: many children in the UK aren’t just heavy for their age, they are also short.

We urgently need to see policy makers engage fully with the wealth of evidence around UPF, and tackle the problem head-on, starting with reforming UK dietary recommendations, especially for babies and young children. The health of future generations demands urgent action now”.

Rob Percival, Head of Food Policy for The Soil Association, said:

“The prevalence of UPF in the diets of the infants and young children should be of grave concern to the UK’s public health authorities. We urgently need a cohesive national food strategy that addresses the drivers of ultra-processing, while also encompassing poverty, inequalities, and access to healthy and sustainable diets.

As a matter of urgency, the UK Government should update its dietary guidelines to make explicit that diets in infancy and early childhood should be based on minimally processed foods and drinks. Robust marketing regulations are needed. And the NHS Food Scanner App should be re-designed, to prevent UPFs being promoted to families as a ‘healthy choice’.

National governments around the world are taking action – the UK risks falling behind.”

First Steps Nutrition Trust makes these seven recommendations to the UK Government:

1. Acknowledge the NOVA classification and update public health recommendations on infant and young child feeding to explicitly address food processing
2. Regulate and enforce the composition, labelling and marketing of commercial baby and toddler foods and drinks



3. Ensure parents/carers have easy access to independent information and practical guidance and support on complementary feeding, and feeding from one to five years of age. This requires proper investment in the health visiting service and services like Family Hubs
4. Ensure parents/carers on low incomes can afford to feed their infants and young children nutritious diets based on real foods by reforming the Healthy Start benefit scheme
5. Enable women who want to breastfeed by increasing support, and by increasing legal protections for breastfeeding and against inappropriate marketing of commercial milk formula
6. Invest in research on UPF consumption in the early years, including on additives in commercial baby and toddler foods
7. Acknowledge and promote the environmental benefits of diets based on minimally processed foods

Notes to editors:

Ultra-processed foods are defined as the fourth category of the NOVA classification of commercial foods and drinks, created by Brazilian academic Carlos Monteiro and colleagues in 2010 and widely recognised by scientists and public health authorities around the world. NOVA groups foods according to the extent and purpose of industrial processing, and its four groups indicate progressive processing. It defines UPF as *“formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusive industrial use, that result from a series of industrial processes, many requiring sophisticated equipment and technology.”*

This report builds on First Steps Nutrition Trust’s 2021 report *“Enabling children to be a healthy weight: What we need to do better in the first 1000 days”*, which can be found here: [Obesity+report+May2021+for+web.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

The report also draws on First Steps Nutrition Trust’s previous work on commercial baby foods and on additives, which can be found here: [Marketed food for children — First Steps Nutrition Trust](#)

About First Steps Nutrition:

First Steps Nutrition Trust is an independent public health nutrition charity that provides information and resources to support eating well from pre-conception to five years.

www.firststepsnutrition.org