Heavy Metals in Infant Foods

UPDATED APRIL 2, 2025

Recent media reports have raised concerns about levels of lead and arsenic in some infant formulas. Much like earlier reports of heavy metals in infant foods (2021), this information may have WIC families reaching out to the local agency with questions. Below are some key points for WIC staff to know and share with families who are concerned about heavy metals in infant formula, baby foods, and fruit juice.

Key Points for WIC staff

- Heavy metals like arsenic, lead, cadmium, and mercury enter foods naturally through the soil, water, and polluted air. Metals may also get into food during manufacturing and processing.
- Heavy metals are found in many foods and beverages consumed by all Americans, including homemade baby food— not just the infant foods and formula provided through WIC.
- There is no known safe level of heavy metal exposure.
- The FDA's **Closer to Zero** plan is working to reduce heavy metals in foods commonly eaten by babies and young children, who are more vulnerable to contaminants because of their smaller size and metabolism.
- **Operation Stork Speed** was recently launched to monitor the formula industry, test for harmful chemicals, update nutrient standards, and study the long-term health effects of formula use.

Feeding tips to reduce heavy metal exposure

- Breastfeed if possible, to reduce exposure.
- Offer a variety of foods and food brands to limit heavy metal intake from a single source.
- Provide a variety of fruits and vegetables (wash them well) and lower-risk foods like banana, butternut squash, apples, oranges, watermelon, eggs, lamb, and baby food meats.
- Avoid higher-risk foods with limited nutrition value such as infant snacks and puffs made from rice flour and teething biscuits and crackers, rice milk, and rice syrup.
- Do not offer juice to infants and limit quantities offered to children. For babies 6 months and older, provide only breastmilk or formula, and water to drink.
- Switch up the grains: Rice does not need to be the first or only cereal offered— try other WIC cereal options, like oatmeal, corn, whole wheat, and multigrain.
- Offer a variety of iron rich foods such as infant meats and fortified cereals for infants beginning solids— iron is critical for brain development.
- Contact your child's doctor if you are still concerned about your child's food or formula.

Environmental tips to reduce heavy metal exposure

- Address lead hazards in the home, especially peeling or chipped paint from older homes.
- Test water source for heavy metals, especially if the home has well water or older pipes. Contact the local health department to have water tested if needed. Also see Safe Drinking Water for Your Baby.
- Don't smoke or vape. Secondhand and thirdhand smoke from both regular and e-cigarettes can expose children to heavy metals.

WIC's role in addressing heavy metals

WIC provides healthy foods to support nutrient intake and health outcomes for WIC participants, but addressing environmental toxins in the food supply chain is a larger effort. If certain infant foods are unsafe for WIC families, they are unsafe for all families and should be recalled from general circulation. The WIC community is a ready partner in the broader effort to hold manufacturers and retailers accountable for their products.

Resources

AAP: Babies should eat a varied diet to protect against heavy metals in commercial, homemade food – American Academy of Pediatrics

Heavy Metals in Baby Food – American Academy of Pediatrics

WIC Infant Nutrition and Feeding – USDA, see page 202+

What's in my baby's food? – Healthy Babies Bright Futures

Reference – Complete Listing of Hyperlinks

AAP: Babies should eat a varied diet to protect against heavy metals in commercial, homemade food (https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/21916/AAP-Babies-should-eat-a-varied-diet-to-protect?)

Closer to Zero: Action Plan for Baby Foods (https://www.fda.gov/food/metals-and-your-food/closer-zero-action-plan-baby-foods?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=fefec597-2f23-4e30-bba7-dfed8179767d)

Heavy Metals in Baby Food (https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/feeding-nutrition/Pages/Metals-in-Baby-Food.aspx)

HHS, FDA Announce Operation Stork Speed (https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/hhs-fda-announce-operation-stork-speed-expand-options-safe-reliable-and-nutritious-infant-formula)

Safe Drinking Water for Your Baby (https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/water/wells/waterquality/safebaby.html)

WIC Infant Nutrition and Feeding (https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/resources/infant-nutrition-and-feeding-guide)

What's in my baby's food? (https://www.healthybabyfood.org/sites/healthybabyfoods.org/files/2019-10/BabyFoodReport_FULLREPORT_ENGLISH_R5b.pdf)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St. N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.