



Marketing of infant foods – technical report

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Extract from forthcoming report 'BOOSTING EARLY YEARS NUTRITION TO SUPPORT A HEALTHY CHILDHOOD' – Due for publication May 2025

Research carried out by Action on Salt & Sugar found that across the packaging of 113 baby and toddler snacks, there were more than 2000 individual claims. All products had at least one 'Composition and Nutrition or Marketing Claim' according to WHO Nutrition and Promotion Profiling Model (NPPM) definitions, and half (51%) had a health claim. This averages at as many as 20 claims across the whole product packaging, ranging from 9-43 claims. The research builds on previous research which found 759 front of pack claims on a similar sample of commercial baby foods¹.

The most common types of claims identified related to the natural or healthful nature of the ingredients (28% of all claims), followed by claims related to the presence or absence of certain ingredients (21%). Other popular claims included those related to taste (12%), optimum feeding (11%) and food texture (9%).

Many of the products with claims contain high amounts of sugar, with 20% containing high levels of sugar and a further 50% containing medium levels of sugar, according to government guidance on front of pack labels². There is also some evidence of a weak but positive link between the number of claims and the nutritional quality of the products, with more claims being linked to a poorer nutritional profile in some cases.

While these claims are currently permitted under UK legislation, the WHO recommends restricting most promotional messages on commercial baby and toddler foods (with exceptions related to gluten free, vegetarian, vegan and similar) to avoid confusion and contradicting public health messages

¹ The Food Foundation. The Broken Plate Report 2025. Available at: https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/TFF_The%20Broken%20Plate%202005%20FINAL%20DIGITAL.pdf

² Based on adult thresholds

Methodology

Action on Salt and Sugar collected data on baby and toddler snacks including nutritional content and claims on packaging. All products were initially collected in store and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

- Incomplete meals often consumed on the go or in between meals, e.g. biscuits, bars, fruit-based snacks
- Located in the baby food aisle
- Products that have an age guidance on them for 4-36 months

Exclusion criteria:

- Snacks advertised for children without an age guidance
- Yogurts

Products were collected between January and April 2024 from Aldi, Asda, the Co-operative, Iceland, Lidl, Marks and Spencer's, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose.

A total of 136 snacks met the inclusion criteria, of which, 113 snacks had complete, readable photos of the full packaging.

The packaging was assessed for nutrition, health and marketing claims, and 2232 claims were identified across the 113 snacks- an average of twenty claims per product.

The claims on the packaging were classified using the WHO's Nutrient and Promotion Profile Model (NPPM) for promoting products for infants and young children aged 6–36 months (see Table 1). The NPPM's promotional requirements aim to improve messaging for caregivers by clarifying product age suitability, improving product naming, warning about high sugar content, and restricting health, nutrient, and marketing claims.

According to the WHO:

- **Nutrition claim** means any representation which states, suggests or implies that a food has nutritional properties, including but not limited to the energy value and the content of protein, fat and carbohydrates, as well as the content of vitamins and minerals.
- **Marketing claim** is defined as product promotion, distribution, selling, advertising, product public relations and information services.
- **Health claim** means any representation that states, suggests or implies that a relationship exists between a food (or a constituent of that food) and health.

Nutrition information was gathered for products that met the inclusion criteria and were available for sale at the time of collection. Sugar content is total sugars i.e. any added, free or naturally present sugars. Most of the sugars in these products are likely to be free sugars. 'Free' means that they are sugars not contained within a cell structure, and consuming too much can cause tooth decay.

There is no front-of-pack colour coding criteria specifically for baby foods. Therefore, the standard criteria, based on adult recommendations, has been used. It is important to note that the maximum amount that is healthy to consume is far less for children, especially infants, than for adults. Front-of-pack nutrition label thresholds are based on total sugars per 100g and are based on guidelines for total sugar intake among adult women. For the reasons exposed above, sugar per portion, free sugars and specific sugar recommendations for children are not taken into consideration and thus these figures likely underestimate the concerning level of sugar.

Table 1:

Prohibited compositional, health and marketing claims on promotional materials (pack labels and other marketing materials) by WHO		
Category	Subcategory	Details / Examples
Composition and nutrition claims	Statements relating to the presence or absence of ingredients generally perceived to be harmful or beneficial	“no...”, “no added...”, “low in...” [sugar, salt, condiments, artificial flavour/colour, maltodextrin, modified starch, additives/preservatives, GMO, junk, etc.] “contains only naturally occurring...” [sugars, salt, etc.]
	Statements relating to the natural or healthful nature of ingredients	“contributes one of your five-a-day [fruit/vegetables]” “contains three types of vegetables”, “contains vegetables” “organic food”, “natural”, “fresh”, “100% natural”, “real fruit/vegetables”
	Statements implying nutritional idealism, high nutrient content or presence of nutrients generally not considered in home-prepared foods	No product should imply that commercial foods are nutritionally superior to home-prepared foods or otherwise undermine important public health recommendations. for example: “nutritionally balanced”, “perfect/unique balance of vitamins/minerals”, “ideal nutrients”, “provides good nutrition to children” “contains...” “a source of...” [minerals, vitamins, iron, vitamin B1 , a host of nutrients, dietary fibre, omega-3, probiotics, prebiotics, protein, amino acids, phospholipids, DHA, carbohydrate, arachidonic acid, etc.]
Health claims	Statements relating to beneficial health or development resulting from the food or ingredients	“good for...”, “supports...”, “improves...”, “...needed for...” [healthy growth, development, digestion, appetite, learning to chew, learning to hold, constipation, defecation, bones and teeth, enteric flora, the brain, eyes, vision, skin health, thyroxine synthesis, red blood cell synthesis, preventing iron deficiency anaemia, collagen synthesis, metabolism, cognitive development, immune system etc.]
	Statements relating to the general healthful nature of ingredients or recipes	“healthy” “goodness of cereals”, “extra goodness with wholegrain oats”, “infant cereal is the ideal foundation to a healthy and balanced diet”, “perfectly balanced to support growth” “draws inspiration from the Mediterranean approach to health and well-being”
Marketing claims	Statements relating to ideal taste	“delight for tiny taste buds/tiny tummies”, “tasty/yummy/delicious”, “suitable for picky eaters”, “in my home the whole family loves them”, “my flavours are a new journey for tiny taste buds”,

		“exotic dishes are full of variety and flavour”, “simple flavour”
	Statements relating to high product quality	“picked at the peak of ripeness”, “bursting with goodness and flavour”, “individually steam cooked”, “we use over 27 different fruits and vegetables”, “we only use specially selected ingredients”
	Statements relating to ideal food texture	“smooth”, “no bits/chunks”, “easy-to-swallow texture that is great for helping your little one as they start to explore solid foods”, “perfectly smooth texture has been specially developed as an ideal first weaning food” “I’m textured”, “yummy crispy bits will encourage your baby to begin to chew”, “ideally suited to promote exposure to textures”
	Statements relating to convenience or lifestyle	“convenient”, “great for a busy and active life”, “ideal for breakfast or meals on the go”, “simply to top up between meals” “great way to make fruit fun” “closest thing to homemade with all of the goodness and none of the guilt” “inspired by my favourite home-cooked recipes”
	Statements conveying ideals on optimum feeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “making the right feeding choices for you and your baby” • “helps to build confidence and enjoyment with food” • “we’ve been pioneering research into infant and toddler nutrition for over 50 years to help you give your baby the best start in life” • “carefully prepared by our baby-food experts” • “grown by farmers we know and trust” • “nothing unnecessary”, “no junk”, “nothing nasty” • “encourages self-feeding”, “perfect for small hands” • “perfect/ideal/optimum... way to feed/introduce foods” • “breakfast is one of the most important meals of the day” • “we guarantee our products provide the best possible start for your baby”
	Statements encouraging dismissal of public health recommendations,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the government advises that you don’t need to wean your little one until they are 6 months old. Every baby is different!” • “the Department of Health and the World Health Organisation recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months. However, if you choose to wean earlier, our ingredients are suitable from 4 months” • Any text or other representation that is likely to undermine or discourage breastfeeding, or that makes a comparison to breastmilk or that

		suggests that the product is nearly equivalent or superior to breastmilk;
	Statements/labels implying product or brand support from experts and trustworthy or influential individuals, groups or organisations	No product should convey an endorsement or anything that may be construed as an endorsement by a professional or other body, unless this has been specifically approved by relevant national, regional or international regulatory authorities. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “quality approved by Mums” • “approved by nutrition experts/celebrities” • “endorsed by paediatricians/national child’s association”
	Statements conveying other idealistic or charitable attributes of the product or brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “committed to giving 10% of profits to help fund food education charities” • B corporation certification, Hain Celestial or other corporate certification implying superior or other ethical or charitable brand attributes and unrelated to product nutrition or content
Allowed promotional messages (packs, labelling and marketing) by WHO		
No compositional, nutritional, health or marketing claims	Statements relating to common allergens	(such as containing or being “free from... [gluten, dairy/lactose, or nuts]” etc.)
	statements relating to religious or cultural requirements	(such as “meat-free”, “vegetarian”, “contains meat”, “Kosher”, “Halal”, etc.)
	descriptive words may be used within the ingredient list	(such as “organic carrots” and “wholegrain wheat flour”)
Promotion and protection of breastfeeding	Statement on the importance of continued breastfeeding for up to two years or beyond and the importance of not introducing complementary feeding before 6 months of age	<p>"Breastfeeding is recommended for at least the first two years of life. Complementary foods should not be introduced before six months of age."</p> <p>"Our products are designed to complement your baby's diet after six months."</p>