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Sugary dangers take the biscuit

On why the sweet life isn't good for your child's health

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BABIES and children love sweet food but, although parents want to please their children, giving them sugary things is not a good idea.



New research has found that even mums and dads who have the best of intentions may be unwittingly feeding their children shop-bought so-called 'healthy' baby snacks that contain an unnecessary two teaspoons of sugar per serving.

Action on Sugar analysed 73 baby and toddler snacks, such as biscuits and rusks, and found that, although they featured "healthy sounding" claims on the packaging, more than a third (37%) could receive a red traffic-light label for sugar content.

Nutritionist Katharine Jenner, campaign director at AoS, says: "Snacks made with processed fruits aren't clearly stated as sugars in ingredients, despite contributing to total sugars, so parents don't realise they're buying sugary options."

Babies don't need sugar

The NHS warns: "Your baby does not need sugar" and paediatric dietitian Lucy Upton says consuming sugars means they could miss out on other nutrients, warning: "It's recommended that babies and young children six months to two years of age generally avoid any added sugars for multiple reasons, from a health and development perspective. "There's potential for increased energy intake, and crucially for children this risks displacement of other nutrients that they require for health and development."

Sugars cause tooth decay

AoS warns baby and toddler foods are often high in free sugars which can lead to tooth decay.

"Tooth decay is very painful, and setting the child up for a taste for sweet foods could easily track through life," says Katharine.

"Snacking on sweet foods at any age contributes to poor oral health."

Babies don't need snacks, especially sugary ones

Katharine says: "Babies under 12 months old do not need snacks at all, but 'mini-meals' to complement their milk-based diets. Yet there's a growing market of snack products aimed at babies aged six months and over, which [can] state on the pack that they are suitable for babies aged 6+ months. This is often mistaken as a dietary requirement, when in fact it relates to food safety."

Eating sugar as a baby can give children a sweet tooth

"Poor diet in childhood can lead to adolescent health issues such as obesity, likely to remain into adulthood," Katharine says.

And Lucy explains it's crucial for babies and very young children to have a wide experience of tastes and textures.

"Sweet food will always be easily and well accepted, so it's important children have a variety of other tastes and food experiences," she says.

Sugar can lead to weight gain which can remain into adulthood

Eating too much sugar regularly means the body stores the extra calories as fat.

“This can lead to weight gain, and if this happens to our children, it’s likely they will carry the weight into their adolescent and adult years, potentially leading to overweight or obesity,” warns Professor Graham MacGregor, professor of cardiovascular medicine at Queen Mary University of London and chairman of AoS.

Beware misleading packaging

AoS is calling for the removal of misleading nutrition and health claims on snack packs, especially around ‘no added sugar/refined sugar’ when such ingredients are replaced by fruit concentrates. These are still a type of free sugars and should be limited, it says.

“Product packaging is often coupled with health messages that put parents’ minds at rest, distracting them from seeing the high hidden sugars content,” warns Katharine.

She also stresses: “Baby foods have the potential to make life easier for stressed parents and support the needs of the growing baby.

“But they must do just that: support the growth of the baby, not put their future health at risk, and the parents must have the information to know what they’re buying.”