

Toddler foods too sweet

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Fifty three percent of food products specifically targeted to babies and toddlers in Canadian grocery stores have an excessive proportion—more than 20 per cent—of calories coming from sugar, according to a new study by University of Calgary professor Charlene Elliott.

The study, funded by the Centre for Science in the Public Interest Canada, examined sugar and sodium levels in 186 food products specifically marketed for [babies](#) and [toddlers](#). Published in the advanced online version of the *Journal of Public Health*, the study also analysed four categories of baby/toddler foods against their adult counterparts to reveal whether a 'halo effect' attributed to baby/toddler food is warranted.

"There is a presumed halo effect around baby and toddler foods because people expect these foods to be held to a higher standard," says Elliott, an associate professor in the Communications & Culture department. "Yet this is not necessarily the case."

The study sought to draw attention to the new, and expanding category of "toddler" foods available in the supermarket—which include fruit snacks, cereal bars, desserts, and cookies—as well as baby food products outside of simple purees of fruits and vegetables (which could be classified as pure foods).

Products in the study included pureed dinners and desserts, toddler entrees and dinners, snacks (biscuits, cookies, fruit snacks, snack bars and yogurts) and some cereals. Excluded were simple purees of fruits

and vegetables, juices and beverages, and also infant formulas and infant cereals designed to be mixed with breast milk or water. The study also made specific comparisons between four types of toddler [food products](#)—toddler cereal bars, cookies/biscuits, fruit snacks and yogurt—and their adult equivalents. It found that these baby/toddler foods were not nutritionally superior to the adult equivalents when it comes to sugar and in some cases fared worse.

"Assessing sugar levels in baby and toddler foods is challenging because there is currently no universally accepted standard," explained Elliott.

"While the American Heart Association (AHA) recommends that adults should limit their consumption of added sugars to six teaspoons a day for women and nine teaspoons a day for men, these recommendations do not extend to children or toddlers. In fact, the AHA has not published specific 'added sugar' recommendations for children or toddlers—even though high sugar foods are deliberately created for them. Health Canada, similarly, offers no direct recommendations—or cautions—regarding sugar intake or upper limits on the intake of added sugar for very young children, or for toddlers, per se."

Given this, the study used established guidelines that suggest foods are of poor nutritional quality if more than 20 per cent of their calories derive from sugar. Over half (53 per cent) of the products examined met these criteria. Forty percent of products listed sugar—or some variant like corn syrup, cane syrup, brown sugar, or dextrose)—in the first four ingredients on the label. Nineteen percent listed sugar (or some variant) as either the first or second ingredient.

"This draws attention to the, perhaps obvious, need to carefully examine the ingredient list," says Elliott. "While some products derive their sugar content from naturally occurring fruit sugars, many products also contain added sugars. It remains fair to ask why it is necessary to add [sugar](#) to these baby or toddler products in the first place."

Elliott also observes that much of the packaging, labeling and framing of such foods play to adult conceptions and classifications of treats and of what it means to eat a meal. "The study contained baby food desserts and 'premium organic cookies' for toddlers—products that would be target adult tastes, as there is no nutritional reason that babies should complete their meals with Banana Coconut Cream Dessert puree or cookies, organic or otherwise. Equally significant is the way such products steer our youngest consumers down the wrong path in terms of reinforcing tastes for sweet foods."

More information: The study "Sweet and salty: nutritional content and analysis of baby and toddler foods" by Charlene Elliott is available on the Journal of Public Health website at: jpubhealth.oxfordjournals.org (click on Advance Access).

Provided by University of Calgary

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