

Ask the Pediatrician: Should I be worried about heavy metals in my baby's food?

9 March 2021, by Dr. Aparna Bole, American Academy Of Pediatrics



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I've been reading about heavy metals in baby food. How concerned should I be?

Recent news about heavy metals found in baby food can leave parents with a lot of questions.

The low levels of [heavy metals](#) found in foods likely are a relatively small part of a child's overall heavy metal exposure risk, but exposure from all sources should be minimized. Heavy metal exposure can be harmful to the developing brain. Many genetic, social, and environment factors influence healthy brain development, and heavy [metal](#) exposure is just one of these factors.

Metals, found naturally in the Earth's crust, are also released into our environment as pollution and get into the water and soil used to grow food. Metals can also get into food from food manufacturing and packaging. Some of the most common metals that get into food include arsenic, lead, cadmium, and mercury.

Stronger rules are needed for testing and limiting the amount of heavy metals in foods for [babies](#)

and toddlers. But there are steps parents can take now to help reduce exposure:

- Think variety. Give your child a well-balanced diet that includes a variety of fruits, vegetables (wash in [cool water](#) before serving), grains, and lean protein. This can lower exposure to metals and other contaminants in some foods.

- Read the labels. Multi-ingredient baby food blends may be a good option. But be aware that different flavor blends, such as kale/pear and spinach/pumpkin, may actually have sweet potatoes as the first ingredient. Look at the ingredient list to be sure you are offering a true variety of foods.

- Switch up your grains. Fortified infant cereals can be a good source of nutrition, but rice cereal does not need to be your baby's first or only cereal. Rice tends to absorb more arsenic from groundwater than other crops do. Serve a variety of grains, such as oat, barley, couscous and bulgur. Try to avoid rice milk and brown rice syrup, which is sometimes used as a sweetener.

- Check your water. Heavy metals can get into tap water: for example, arsenic can contaminate well water, and older pipes may contain lead. You can contact your local health department to have your water tested if this is a concern.

- Breastfeed if possible. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends breastfeeding as your baby's sole source of nutrition for about six months.

- Avoid [fruit juice](#). Offer toddlers and young children sliced or pureed whole fruits rather than juice. Some fruit juices can contain concerning levels of heavy metals. Plus, juice is high in sugar and not as nutrient-rich as whole fruit. Stick with breast milk or formula for babies under 6 months old, and water and milk after age 1.

– Make healthy fish choices. Some types of fish can be high in a form of mercury and other metals. Of most concern are larger fish that eat other fish, such as shark, orange roughy, swordfish, and albacore/white tuna. Light tuna (solid or chunk), salmon, cod, whitefish, and pollock are better options.

– Consider homemade baby food. Making your own baby [food](#) may help lower the risk of contaminants during processing, and you can choose the ingredients. Remember that offering a variety of foods is just as important when making your own [baby food](#) as when buying prepared baby foods.

Organic baby foods may have lower levels of some pesticides and other chemicals. But because heavy metals are found in the soil, organic foods often contain similar levels of heavy metals as non-organic foods.

Keep in mind that there are other ways to reduce exposure to heavy metals. For example, the most common source of lead exposure is from peeling or chipping paint from older homes. Soil, some cosmetics, and spices, water and certain occupations and hobbies can also be sources of exposure. In addition, second-hand and third-hand smoke from regular and e-cigarettes may expose children to metals such as cadmium and lead. Vaping allows heavy metals from the vape coils to get into the air and be inhaled.

If you're concerned about metals exposure in your child, talk with your pediatrician.

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