

A word of caution against baby formula

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Madam, WHO recommends that infants should be exclusively fed on breastmilk till 6 months after birth. It is considered an ideal infant food for its proven health benefits.¹ But in the past few decades, the use of baby formula has increased considerably. This can be attributed to aggressive media marketing, where the formula is often claimed as an equally beneficial substitute for breastfeeding.²

An international cross-sectional survey was done recently to determine the health claims of baby formula and to assess the quality of evidence used.³ One of the common claims made by infant formula-making companies is the presence of PUFA (polyunsaturated fatty acids) in their products and its crucial role in brain development. The study found that companies were unable to substantiate this association. Other claims, including the presence of probiotics and boosting the immune system also do not have any profound scientific basis or research. Health benefits-related claims were made often without sufficient evidence or the evidence given had a high risk of bias. Studies used to support claims had a conflict of interest in many cases as the studies either had direct support from the formula industry or the authors had some affiliations with the company. Less than 15 per cent of products used human clinical trials to support their claims. Around 90 per cent of the trials either had missing data or finding not in favour of the claim made by the company. This is in contrast to the statements such as "supported by over 40 years of

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research" or "widely studied" which are routinely made by formula-making companies and have a high potential for misguiding parents and healthcare providers.

Many parents are inclined to use baby formula because of its marketing and easy accessibility.⁴ But this study has raised several questions about regulating the formula industry and its potential usage as a substitute for breastfeeding. Health experts have suggested to governments that formula should be sold in plain packaging and there should be a proper check on the marketing of infant formula. Governments from all over the world need to pay attention to this ever-rising industry of 50 billion dollars and strict protocols should be introduced that companies have to follow.

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