

Surprise! Baby food pouches are extra-sweet and low in iron

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Research out of the University of Otago's Department of Human Nutrition has examined the nutritional quality of baby food pouches found in most supermarkets. The findings which include notable results

around sugar and iron content have been published in the *Nutrients* journal.

One of the most important results was finding pouches to be very low in iron. A baby would need to eat more than 14 pouches a day to be getting their daily iron requirement—that's almost 2 kilograms of [pouch](#) foods.

"It is really important babies are offered iron-rich food from six months of age, but our research found pouches across the board did not contain appreciable amounts of iron, nor were they fortified with iron, and this could place infants at risk of iron deficiency if they do not receive iron from other sources," says Ioanna Katiforis from Otago's Department of Human Nutrition, who led this research as part of her Master of Science.

The research also found pouches are sweeter than other [baby foods](#) because pouches are more likely to contain sweet fruits and vegetables such as apple, kumara and pumpkin.

"Whatever parents feed their baby—commercial baby foods or homemade—they should offer foods from a variety of food groups, not just foods based on sweet fruits and vegetables, and they need to ensure that infants are being offered iron-rich foods to meet their iron needs," Miss Katiforis says.

Despite the importance of baby food for [child health](#), there has been a lack of research on New Zealand commercial baby foods' nutritional quality, and no studies have reported on how much sugar is being added to baby food pouches. To address this knowledge gap the research team conducted a cross-sectional survey of 266 baby foods sold in supermarkets in 2019-20—half of these were baby food pouches.

The energy, iron, vitamin B12, total sugars (this includes sugars that are

naturally in sweet fruits and vegetables), and added sugar content of baby food pouches and other forms of commercial baby foods were studied.

Baby food pouches contained similar amounts of energy, iron, and vitamin B12 to other forms of commercial baby foods. Surprisingly, although baby food pouches were sweeter (because they were more likely to contain sweet fruits and vegetables), they weren't more likely to have sugar added to them. Overall, baby foods being sold in New Zealand were low in sugar, except for custards, and sweet snacks for babies—with the [sugar](#) sometimes being disguised as "fruit juice concentrate."

Dry infant cereals are an important source of iron for infants because they are fortified with iron. However none of the baby food pouches were fortified. Therefore, consuming food pouches to the exclusion of other commercial baby foods may place infants at risk of iron deficiency if they do not get enough [iron](#) from other sources.

The research team eagerly await the results of ongoing research which is now investigating whether pouches influence the amount of energy babies consume, with the easy-squeeze pouches potentially delivering more food than if the same food was fed by spoon. In New Zealand, [food](#) labels recommend pouch contents are poured onto a spoon for infant feeding, however anecdotal evidence suggests these recommendations are not being followed and [babies](#) are self-feeding from pouches.

More information: Ioanna Katiforis et al. Energy, Sugars, Iron, and Vitamin B12 Content of Commercial Infant Food Pouches and Other Commercial Infant Foods on the New Zealand Market, *Nutrients* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/nu13020657](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13020657)

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