

Chocolate- and vanilla-flavored formulas for toddlers are criticized

Nutritionists and mothers say the new product from Mead Johnson Nutrition Co. will lead to obesity.

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Blogging moms and nutritionists are criticizing a new formula for toddlers that comes in chocolate and vanilla flavors as an early start to obesity.

"Is it really a good idea to get our kids hooked on all things chocolate at the same time they're learning to walk?" one blogger posted on Momlogic.com.

"What's next, genetically modifying moms to produce chocolate breast milk?" wrote another.

Introduced by Mead Johnson Nutrition Co. in February as a beverage for toddlers who are transitioning from infant formula or breast milk, Enfagrow Premium's toddler chocolate and vanilla formulas are milk-based but contain 19 grams of sugar per 7-ounce serving. The Glenview, Ill., company said the product is no sweeter than chocolate milk or orange juice that toddlers drink and contains added nutrients that milk lacks, such as Omega-3 DHA and prebiotics.

"The toddlers years can be particularly challenging since food preferences may be erratic and unpredictable," said Mead Johnson spokesman Chris Perille. "Products such as Enfagrow Premium can play a role in helping children achieve a more balanced, healthy daily diet."

Perille said the idea is to get a toddler to consume milk, even flavored milk, because it will lead to a healthier lifestyle.

Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, disagreed.

Nestle, who purchased a 29-ounce package of Enfagrow recently for \$18.99 (22 servings) to study the product, said it will lead children who drink it to crave sugary beverages.

"You want kids to be interested in eating a very, very wide range of foods because variety helps create nutritional balance," she said. "You don't want them to think that every food needs to be sweet or salty."

Nestle criticized Enfagrow on her blog <http://www.foodpolitics.com>. The post automatically feeds to the Atlantic Monthly's website and has been cross-posted on mommy blogs across the Internet.

She complained to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, arguing that the product is claiming health benefits for children younger than 2. FDA spokesman Michael Herndon said the product is considered a food and not an infant formula under FDA guidelines and does not appear to be in violation of the law as it doesn't claim to "cure" anything, only to "support" normal body functions.

Enfagrow is in what the food industry calls the "follow-on formula" category, which takes the concept of baby formula and extends it into toddlerhood. Abbott Nutrition produces Similac Go & Grow, for older infants and toddlers, but it's unflavored.

JP Morgan analyst Terry Bivens said infant formula is the "bread and butter" of companies such as Abbott, a unit of Abbott Laboratories, and Mead Johnson.

Mead Johnson is one of three dominant competitors in the global pediatric nutrition market, which mainly consists of infant formula and toddler milk. Mead's Enfamil and Abbott's Similac each have about 40% of the market, followed by Nestle's Good Start with about 10% of the market, according to analyst Dave Sekera at Morningstar.

In 2009, Mead reported total sales of \$2.8 billion, with \$1.9 billion from infant formula and \$900 million from children's nutritional products, mostly toddler milk.

The company launched 30 new products in 2009 after dry spell of several years, Sekera said, and has a new strategy that aims to extend the amount of time consumers spend using their products beyond early infancy.

Jessica Parisi would do just about anything to get her 1-year-old to stop throwing food or feeding it to the dog. She's even tried masking veggie protein links as hot dogs.

"Sometimes he'll eat blueberries, and other times he'll say 'No blueberries!' and throw them," said the Mount Prospect, Ill., resident.

Two weeks from his second birthday, Chase is underweight, and Parisi says she would gladly try chocolate- or vanilla-flavored toddler formula if she thought he would eat it.

"I probably would try giving it to him as a supplement just to try to get more nutrients in him," she said.

Stacy DeBroff, founder and chief executive of MomCentral.com, a website geared toward busy moms, said that while at first glance chocolate-flavored formula sounds like a bad idea, in some cases, it might be a "second best" option for parents with picky toddlers.

"If something stands between your children and drinking milk, than this becomes a better choice than juice or juice-based products, even, theoretically water," she said.

Toddlers crave carbohydrates all the time, she said, and sometimes their palates need to be "bribed," she said.

Terri Freeman knows all about the carb cravings. The Streeterville, Ill., resident's 3-year-old, Shayna, won't touch vegetables. She just wants chicken nuggets, pizza and pasta, she said.

"My doctor hasn't been that concerned," she said.

Freeman said she asked her doctor about it and was told that her daughter is healthy nutritionally and to try the best she can to incorporate small portions of vegetables or even fruit into her diet.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, normal toddlers will experience a sharp drop in appetite after age 1 because of slowed growth. A typical 1-year-old needs just 1,000 calories a day, according to the academy, about half that of the average adult. The academy recommended providing several nutrition-rich options and allowing a toddler to choose what he or she wants to eat

from those options. For toddlers who refuse to eat any of it, the academy recommended wrapping up the food for later when the child will be more hungry.

Feeding a toddler sweets at that age, the pediatric organization said, will fuel the child's interest in eating more sweets and diminish their interest in nutritious foods, and dietary supplements are rarely needed for toddlers who eat a varied diet.

"They just want to eat bread and crackers," said Jill Houk, co-founder of Centered Chef Food Studios in Chicago and a participant in the Healthy Schools Campaign, "They want to eat fruit or anything sweet. In the short term, it may seem like 'I just want to get nutrition in this child.' But in reality, you're creating a very bad situation."

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