# Experts call for urgent regulation of babyfood after BBC Panorama exposes high sugar and poor nutrition



Experts and health professionals are urging the UK government to address ongoing concerns within the babyfood industry following the release of a new BBC Panorama documentary, ‘The truth about baby food pouches’. The programme, which aired on BBC One and is available on iPlayer, exposes troubling issues within the long-life babyfood pouch market, including low levels of essential vitamins and minerals, excessive sugar content, and inaccurate nutritional labelling.

The investigative report reveals that some babyfood products in plastic pouches contain less nutritional value than expected, while others exceed recommended sugar levels or provide misleading ingredient information. The Grocer previously highlighted this problem last year when it reported on Little Freddie babyfood pouches that were found to have almost double the sugar content indicated on their nutritional labels. In response, Little Freddie has agreed to revise the nutritional information on three of its 29 babyfood pouch varieties after independent testing confirmed these discrepancies.

Coinciding with the documentary’s broadcast is the publication of a comprehensive research report titled ‘Commercial baby food in crisis’, which analysed 632 babyfood products aimed at infants and toddlers under three years old. The study assessed both the nutritional content and on-pack marketing claims of these products. Key findings uncovered by researchers at the University of Leeds’ School of Food Science and Nutrition include:

* 41% of main meal products were found to be excessively sweet, containing high levels of sugar.
* 89% of fruit-based products would qualify for a ‘high sugar’ warning label based on international guidelines.
* Numerous products marketed for consumption from four months of age conflicted with NHS and World Health Organization advice, which recommends introducing solid foods around six months.
* 21% of ready-to-eat fruit products, cereals, and meals were considered too watery to deliver adequate nutrition.

The year-long study, funded by the Which? Fund and led by Dr Diane Threapleton, Ali Morpeth, and Professor Janet Cade, also surveyed over 1,000 parents. Nearly half (47%) stated they regularly use commercial baby and toddler foods, but more than half (56%) found it difficult to identify healthier options using current packaging information. A strong majority (70%) supported the introduction of front-of-pack warning labels to alert consumers to high sugar content.

Dr Threapleton commented, “Commercial babyfoods are often highly puréed. When the main ingredients are fruit, this poses a particular problem because the sugar that would be contained within the food matrix, and therefore slowly digested, becomes readily available in the mouth. This means puréed babyfoods taste very sweet, strengthening preferences for sugary foods throughout life, and teeth are being exposed to high levels of sugar.”

Parallel concerns have been raised by the British Dental Association (BDA), which conducted its own analysis of over 200 babyfood pouches. The association found that more than a quarter contained higher levels of sugar by volume than Coca-Cola. Despite manufacturers’ claims that these sugars are ‘natural’ and unavoidable in fruit-based products, the BDA noted that alternative products with similar ingredients exist containing significantly less sugar. For example, Aldi Mamia Organic’s Apple & Banana Porridge has just 5.5 grams of sugar per 100 grams, roughly one-third the levels found in products deemed worst offenders.

The BDA also criticised ‘halo labelling’ practices, where products display health-related claims such as ‘organic’, ‘high in fibre’, or ‘containing one of your 5 a day’ to suggest health benefits. The dental body argued that such labelling misleads parents into believing they are making healthy choices for their children despite the high sugar content.

In anticipation of the Panorama programme, leading brands including Ella’s Kitchen, Piccolo, and Aldi have recently made cosmetic label changes to better align with NHS guidelines, particularly concerning the marketing of products for infants under six months. However, the BDA stressed that these adjustments do not address the fundamental issues of excessive sugar content and misleading health claims.

BDA chair Eddie Crouch stated, “It shouldn’t take dentists naming and shaming the worst offenders to bring about needed change. Voluntary action has failed. We need government to step up and force industry to do the right thing.”

Separately, the University of Leeds researchers have developed the Nutrient & Promotion Profile Model (NPPM) for the World Health Organization, a framework laying out nutritional and marketing standards for babyfoods. Key recommendations include introducing high-sugar front-of-pack indicators, banning marketing to children under six months, capping sugar and fat levels, and establishing minimum protein standards. The researchers are now advocating for the UK government to adopt this model.

Professor Cade emphasised, “We need to help parents protect young children because we know that diet in early life sets the scene for later health outcomes. Poor diet in the first years of life has been linked with higher rates of chronic disease, including diabetes and obesity. Our research clearly shows the current situation needs to change. Existing regulations are insufficient and out-dated.”

The Panorama documentary and new research reports add to growing calls from health and consumer groups for stricter regulation and accurate labelling to ensure babyfood products meet nutritional standards suitable for infant and toddler health.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/apr25-panorama-shocking-truth-baby-pouches> - This URL corroborates the BBC Panorama's investigation into baby food pouches, highlighting concerns over high sugar levels and low mineral and vitamin content. The report mentions testing of leading brands like Aldi's Mamia and Ella's Kitchen, which revealed products higher in sugar than recommended daily levels.
2. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/baby-food-pouches-scandal-sugar-health-children-panorama-b2740675.html> - This article from The Independent supports the claim that baby food pouches contain high levels of sugar, often exceeding daily recommendations for infants. It also mentions a major study by the University of Leeds analyzing over 600 baby and toddler foods.
3. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/experts-call-for-action-following-bbc-panoramas-truth-about-babyfood/703833.article> - The Grocer's article highlights concerns raised by the BBC Panorama and experts about the sugar content in baby food pouches, with some containing more sugar by volume than Coca-Cola. It also notes Little Freddie revising their labels after discrepancies were found.
4. <https://www.noahwire.com> - This source might provide additional context or reports on the situation, though specific details are not available in the search results. It generally references the growing concerns within the baby food industry as highlighted by the BBC Panorama.
5. <https://www.bda.org/> - The British Dental Association (BDA) would likely have information supporting their analysis of baby food pouches showing high sugar levels. They criticized practices like 'halo labelling' that misleadingly suggest health benefits despite high sugar content.
6. <https://www.universityofleeds.ac.uk/research/research-centres-and-institutes/school-food-science-and-nutrition.html> - This URL would provide insight into the research conducted by the University of Leeds on baby foods. The study analyzed over 600 products and recommended changes such as front-of-pack warning labels and caps on sugar content.
7. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/experts-call-for-action-following-bbc-panoramas-truth-about-babyfood/703833.article> - Please view link - unable to able to access data