

# Healthy Early Years Diets: Achieving the Best Start in Life



Good diets in the early years create the foundation for life-time good health. Establishing a supportive food environment for young children aligns with the Government's commitment to ensure that all children get the best start in life. Doing so would maximise developmental and educational outcomes, and ensure healthy growth, thereby minimising the risk of diet-related illnesses. This will be key to delivering not only key government health priorities, but also levelling up and ensuring every child can reach their full potential, regardless of where they were born.



The early years (from pregnancy to five years old) is a crucial time where growth trajectories are established and behaviours are formed, that track into childhood and adulthood. Healthy behaviours in the early years, with a nutritious diet, is an important factor in helping children develop healthy food preferences, grow to their full potential both physically and mentally and thrive in school.

There is a lack of initiatives to foster healthy diets in the early years, providing a unique moment for political action. The next government can make vital changes to help children grow up healthily. We propose a series of achievable, evidence-informed and cost-effective steps that will measurably improve the quality of diets in the early years.

## Immediate actions: Enable families to feed their babies and young children healthy diets

*91% of parents support government action to make sure all food and drinks available in the baby aisle are nutritionally appropriate.*

Enabling women who want to breastfeed would result in significant health benefits and cost savings for the NHS and local authorities: breastfeeding reduces the risk of common childhood illnesses and diet-related disease later in life and protects mothers from certain cancers and heart disease. However, the UK has some of the lowest breastfeeding rates globally; 68% of babies in England are breastfed at birth<sup>1</sup>, compared to 83% in the United States<sup>2</sup>.

When babies are introduced to foods and drinks, they should meet their needs nutritionally and developmentally. Yet currently, many commercial baby and toddler foods and drinks are not appropriate to nourish and support healthy growth and development. Key issues relate to their nutrition composition (in particular high free sugars) and promotion of poor dietary habits (including snacking and early introduction of solids). They are also often marketed in a misleading way, with the use of claims and statements on product packaging that imply they are healthier than they actually are; 41% of products aimed at children that claim to be healthy are in fact 'unhealthy'<sup>3</sup>.

### Actions:

- ✓ Close existing legal loopholes<sup>4</sup> to protect families from misleading marketing that undermines breastfeeding and safe and appropriate formula feeding.
- ✓ Implement standards to improve the nutrition composition and marketing of commercial baby and toddler foods and drinks.
  - Align with the benchmarks set by the WHO Europe's Nutrient and Promotion Profile Model<sup>5</sup>.
  - Mandate the enforcement of the standards to create a level playing field for businesses.
  - Ensure that commercial foods and drinks for infants and young children are appropriate for the age groups they are marketed to.
  - Ensure any marketing, labelling or packaging, does not include health and nutrition claims.

## Next steps: Support early years settings to provide nutritious food and drink

*Currently, 1.7million children under 5 year-olds are registered for the government's 15 or 30 hour childcare hours in the UK. This figure will rise with the incoming childcare reform policy which will take effect from 2024*

All children should have access to nutritious food and drink to contribute to them achieving their full potential. With more children attending early years settings (including nurseries and childminders), the meals, snacks and drinks served must be nutritionally appropriate. However, the current voluntary guidance for settings was last updated in 2017, has not been widely adopted and is frequently perceived to be impractical or culturally inappropriate.

### Actions:

- ✓ Review and update the voluntary Eat Better Start Better guidance in partnership with early years settings and local authorities, to ensure settings are supported with guidance that is feasible, relevant and evidence-based.
- ✓ Legislate the updated guidance to ensure millions of children benefitting from early years education can access appropriate food and drink.

## Foundational initiatives: Invest in the foundations for health in the early years

*A reduction of almost 40% of the health visiting workforce since 2015 has led to an estimated shortfall of 5,000 health visitors in England*

Statutory services including health visiting, Family Hubs, and breastfeeding support have unique roles to play in providing guidance and support for pregnant women and families on healthier diets and feeding practices, particularly given the widespread misleading marketing of commercial infant and toddler formula, foods and drinks. Workforce shortages in England, and real term reductions in the public health funding, have left many families missing out on these vital services. Lastly, with the rising cost of food leaving healthy diets out of the reach of many, schemes such as Healthy Start (which helps pregnant teenagers and pregnant women and young families on low incomes access healthy foods and vitamins) are vital to provide a nutritional safety net for families at risk of food insecurity.

### Actions:

- ✓ Invest sufficient funding in local community health programmes:
  - Help local authorities and trusted community professionals and services to level inequalities and ensure consistent, accessible and evidence-based programmes are available for all families. These should include:
    - Practical advice on eating well in pregnancy and for new mums,
    - Breastfeeding support,
    - Support for complementary feeding.
  - Review funding for food provision in early years settings and the thresholds for free school meals.
- ✓ Expand eligibility and increase investment into the Healthy Start scheme to ensure greater coverage and provision of a functional nutrition safety net.

### **Health policy must be protected from commercial influence**

- ✓ Develop fair and ethical principles for interacting with the food industry, underpinned by the latest evidence on the commercial determinants of health.

### **Monitor and Evaluate**

- ✓ All actions must be guided by up-to-date data to ensure strategies keep pace with the changing food and health environments.
- ✓ Independent monitoring and evaluation are necessary to support and guide effective implementation.

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*Brenner & Co*



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Children's Food  
Campaign



Better  
Breastfeeding



La Leche League GB



## References and footnotes

1 NHS Digital (2022). NHS Maternity Services Monthly Statistics, England, June 2022 – Babies. Available at: [bit.ly/NHSbabystats](https://bit.ly/NHSbabystats)

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022). Breastfeeding Report Card, United States 2022. [Online] Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/reportcard.htm>

3 The Ofcom nutrient profiling model (NPM) was used to assess if products were healthy. Garcia A, Morillo-Santander G, Parrett A, et al (2019). Confused health and nutrition claims in food marketing to children could adversely affect food choice and increase risk of obesity. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 104, 541-546.

4 Loopholes exist in UK legislation, whereby follow-on formula can be marketed for use from 6-12 months and 'growing-up' and toddler milks are marketed for children over 1 year of age. The same branding and virtually identical labelling to infant milks facilitates 'cross promotion', and the milks for over 1s are not regulated with respect to composition or marketing.

5 <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/WHO-EURO-2022-6681-46447-67287>