

# What's in Your Kid's Food?

## **A pediatrician helps parents understand and act on new food safety guidelines.**

As a mom of two and a pediatric gastroenterologist and nutrition specialist with the University of Miami Health System, if anyone understands the challenges of parenting, it's [Dr. Amanda Fifi](#).

So, when she learned about American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [guidelines](#) urging parents to limit children's exposure to [chemicals](#) found in plastics and processed meats and to eat more fresh foods, she says she was a tad frustrated.

"I agree with the guidelines. It's important for parents to know that just because a product is in grocery stores or on their child's lunch tray, it's not necessarily safe," says Dr. Fifi. "The problem is making parents responsible for following recommendations when much more needs to be done at the policy level. It's hard for parents to practice healthy habits when [WIC](#), our national public health nutrition program, and many school cafeterias provide processed food and food in plastic packaging. And for families with limited finances or access to fresh food, it's cheaper to buy processed."

The AAP recommendations stem from research linking chemicals in food packaging and processed meats and eating processed foods to obesity, diabetes, and other endocrine disorders. The guidelines urge parents to:

- Limit the use of plastic food containers and packaging
- Avoid eating processed meats during pregnancy
- Eat more fruits and vegetables instead of processed foods

So, what's a busy parent to do? Understanding the reasons why certain chemicals affect children's health is a start. But let's be honest. If you're short on time, you can skip ahead to the action steps so you can start protecting your family's health today.

## **Why the guidelines matter**

Many processed meats and plastic food packaging contain chemicals that affect hormonal growth and development. This is especially troubling for kids, since they consume more of these chemicals per kilogram of body weight. As processed and packaged foods become more prevalent, children today will eat more of these foods over a lifetime, than adults. In addition, their developing bodies are more vulnerable to the synthetic chemicals in their meals. These chemicals disrupt the body's ability to process calories, which can cause insulin resistance. This increases the risk of obesity and diabetes. Numerous scientific studies bear this out, as do America's rapidly increasing childhood obesity and diabetes rates. Thyroid problems, various cancers, and attention deficit disorder have also been linked to some of the chemicals used in the processing and packaging of our food.

"As plastics and processed food become more available in developing countries, we are seeing a concurrent rise in obesity and other endocrine disorders," says Dr. Fifi.

The chemicals in question are known as "endocrine disrupters" and include:

- Bisphenol A (BPA) - in plastic and canned food and beverage containers
- Phthalates - in plastic packaging
- Perfluoroalkyl (PFCs) - in grease-proof packaging and paper
- Perchlorates - in plastic packaging
- Nitrates and nitrites - in food preservatives

## **Other Current Concerns**

As if the AAP concerns weren't enough, recent articles warned parents of [heavy metals in baby and toddler foods](#), as well as [glyphosate](#), a chemical weed killer, in oat cereals and snacks. The risk is not immediate, but since children eat more of these foods for longer periods, trace amounts of chemicals may pose health risks.

As with plastics, there are things parents can do to protect their family's long-term health. It's important to serve a variety of foods so infants and children are not overexposed to any one food; limit processed snacks (especially those made from rice or oats); and eat more healthy whole foods. Other foods children should avoid because of the risk of heavy metals are chocolate, protein powders, and large fish including tuna, mackerel, orange roughy, shark, and swordfish. Women of childbearing age should also avoid those fish. If you live in an older house or use well water, get your water tested for lead.

The main takeaway: Eating a wide variety of healthy, whole foods, not only protects your family from excessive exposure to unhealthy elements, the nutrients in healthy food boost your immunity and may help the body defend itself from damage.

## **Keeping kids safer**

Plastics and processed foods are everywhere. So, where to begin? Dr. Fifi has some suggestions.

### ***Plastics***

Whenever possible, replace plastic food and beverage containers with glass, ceramic or stainless steel. They don't leach, or leak, harmful chemicals into food and can be safely put in the dishwasher. (Plastic should be hand washed, since heat releases more of the chemicals.) When you can't avoid plastic, avoid the # 3, 6 or 7 recycling code (unless the #7 says "BPA-free" or "bioware" or "greenware", which is made

from plants).

Many stores now carry paper straws, BPA-free sandwich bags, wax paper bags, and parchment paper (wrap food in parchment before wrapping in plastic). Many more canned foods now also state “BPA-free” on the label.

Check baby and toddler toys, pacifiers, teething rings, and sippy cups to make sure they’re BPA-free. Replace items that are heavily scratched, cut or damaged. When possible, do not place these in the dishwasher or microwave.

Share this blog post with school or day care center leaders. Ask them what steps they can take to protect your child’s health. You may want to invite other parents to join you.

### ***Processed foods***

If you can recognize a food’s ingredients by looking at it, it’s probably a healthier “whole” food: an orange versus orange-flavored drink; apple versus fruit rollups; a trail mix of raisins and peanuts versus chips.

Limit processed meat in family meals. Use vegetables instead of pepperoni on pizzas and use hummus, egg salad or peanut butter instead of lunch meat in sandwiches.

Frozen foods are okay, but avoid heavily processed varieties. Choose grilled over fried chicken nuggets, plain vegetables over those smothered in sauce or fried.

At each meal, try to fill half your child’s plate (and yours) with fruits or vegetables, one-fourth protein, and one-fourth carbohydrates. Breakfast might be a veggie omelet with whole grain toast or oatmeal with berries, bananas, and chopped nuts, for example.

**Read “[Easy Ways to Eat Better](#)” for more ideas.**

You’re not the only parent whose to-do list just got longer.

“Physicians have a responsibility to push policy change at a government level, to increase research in this area, and to encourage the FDA to regulate the chemicals put into our foods,” says Dr. Fifi. She and her colleagues also promote childhood health during patient visits and by speaking at support groups, health workshops, and PTA meetings. “People are much more aware of the dangers plastics pose to sea turtles than the dangers they pose to kids in their own homes and schools. For now, parents should do the best they can to make lifestyle changes that will improve the health of the whole family.”

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*Nancy Moreland is a contributor to UMiami Health News. She has written for several major health care systems and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Her articles have also appeared in the Chicago Tribune.*