

Ready-made baby foods: Do parents know the facts?



Poll report

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Report highlights

- One in five children (19%) aged less than five years eat commercial ready-made foods most days of the week, with a further one in three (31%) having these foods at least once a week.
- For one in four babies (22%) who eat ready-made foods, these products make up most or all of their diet.
- The main reasons parents choose to give their children ready-made foods are convenience (92%), taste (78%), cost (68%) and because they believe it is a healthy choice (73%).
- More than half (52%) of parents think ready-made baby and toddler foods contain ingredients to make sure children grow and develop well, with one in five (19%) believing ready-made foods are healthier for children than food made at home.
- Two in five parents (41%) of babies and/or toddlers believe that toddlers have different nutritional needs to the rest of the family meaning they cannot eat regular family food.
- The majority of parents (53%) falsely believe that the content of commercial ready-made food products for infants and toddlers is regulated by government to ensure that it provides good nutrition for children.

For most babies who eat ready-made foods,
these products make up at least half of their diet



In a survey conducted in July 2021, a nationally representative sample (by age, sex and state of residence) of Australian parents of children aged less-than-five years was asked a series of questions about their attitudes and understanding regarding the contents and regulation of commercial ready-made infant and toddler food products. Parents of children aged four months to less-than-five years were also asked about their child's consumption of commercial ready-made infant and toddler food products.

For the purposes of this study, 'ready-made' foods were defined as ready-made or processed baby and toddler foods that are sold in supermarkets and other shops or online. These foods usually come packaged in pouches, jars or boxes. Examples of these foods include purees, ready-made meals and handheld snacks. They do not include baby or toddler formula.

'Babies' were defined as children aged less than 12 months and 'toddlers' as children aged between one year and less than five years.

How often do babies and toddlers eat ready-made foods?

Consumption of commercial ready-made foods by Australian babies and toddlers is common, with one in five children (19%) aged less than five years eating these foods most days of the week, and a further one in three (31%) having these foods at least once a week (see figure 1).

Intake is highest among babies, with more than half (54%) consuming ready-made food at least once a week. Just over a quarter (29%) of children aged less than five years are reported by their parents to never consume ready-made foods in a typical week.

Of those babies who consume any ready-made foods, 22% of parents report that these foods constitute most or all of their child's diet and a further 29% report ready-made foods are about half of the diet. Overall, this corresponds to ready-made foods making up at least half of the diet for more than a third (39%) of all babies.

Consumption of ready-made food products by babies and toddlers on most days of the week was more common among children of sole parents (34%) than partnered parents (16%) and children of parents with lower levels of education (year 12 or less) (31%) compared to parents with a certificate (17%) or undergraduate or higher qualification (19%).



Consumption of ready-made foods by Australian babies and toddlers

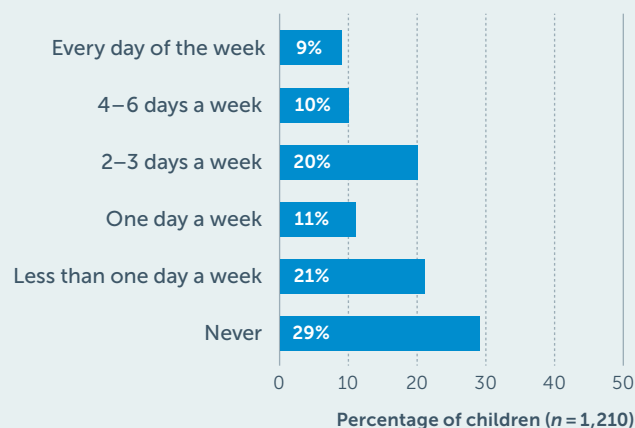


Figure 1.

Why do parents choose ready-made foods for their children?

Convenience is the leading reason parents choose ready-made foods for their baby or toddler

The leading reasons parents choose to give their children ready-made foods relate to convenience, with 92% saying they are somewhat, very or extremely likely to choose these products because they are quick and easy (see figure 2). Three quarters of parents said they would be at least somewhat likely to choose ready-made foods because they don't need to be refrigerated before opening (74%) and their child can eat the food directly from the packet (78%). One in three parents (36%) indicated they would be at least somewhat likely to choose ready-made foods because they are not sure how to prepare home-made food for their child and half (47%) agreed it is not practical for parents to make all food for their babies or toddlers at home. Over half (56%) of parents said they would rather feed their child home-made food but they don't have time to make it.

Children like the taste of ready-made baby and toddler foods

Three in four parents (78%) said they would be at least somewhat likely to choose to feed ready-made foods to their child because they like the taste (see figure 2), and 59% said their child prefers the taste of ready-made foods to that of other (home-made) foods.

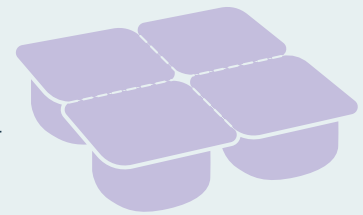
Parents believe ready-made baby and toddler foods are a healthy choice

Of greatest concern was the finding that three quarters of parents (73%) were somewhat, very or extremely likely to choose ready-made foods for their child because they believed it to be a healthy choice (see figure 2). One in five (19%) parents believed ready-made baby and toddler foods are healthier for children than food made at home with a further 30% believing they are as healthy as food made at home. Forty-two per cent of parents believed toddlers have different nutritional needs which means they cannot eat the same foods as others in the family.

Parents say ready-made baby and toddler foods are cheap

Two thirds of parents (68%) said they would be at least somewhat likely to feed their child ready-made food because it was cheap. Two in three (63%) parents reported they were concerned about the environmental impact of the packaging of ready-made baby and toddler foods.

Choosing ready-made foods for their child because they believed them to be healthy was more commonly reported by sole parents (82%) than partnered parents (70%) and by parents with a lower level of education (year 12 or less) (90%) than parents with a certificate (69%) or undergraduate or higher qualification (71%).



Reasons parents choose to give their baby or toddler ready-made food products

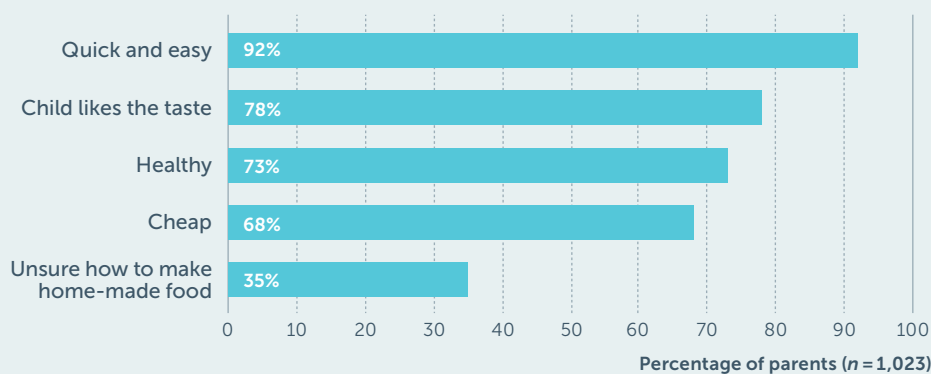


Figure 2.

Proportion of parents likely to be **influenced by claims** on ready-made food packaging

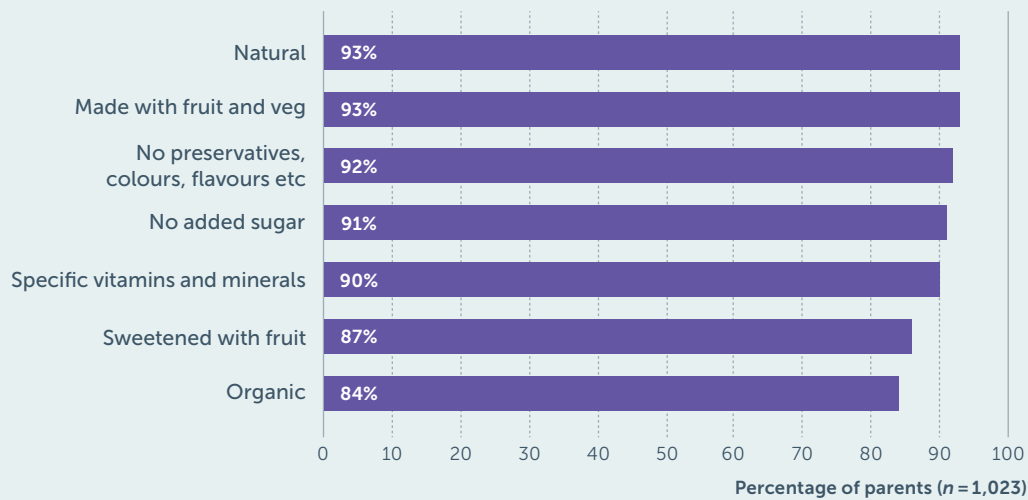


Figure 3.

Claims about content on packaging are likely to influence most parents' choices

When choosing a particular ready-made baby or toddler food product, claims on the packaging about the contents of the product (such as organic, natural sweetness and no added sugar) were very or extremely likely to influence the majority of parents' choices. The claims 'natural ingredients' and 'made with fruit and vegetables' were the most likely to increase uptake, with 93% of parents agreeing it was at least somewhat likely to make them choose to buy that particular product (see figure 3).

What do parents know and believe about the regulation of commercial ready-made baby and toddler foods?

Parents falsely believe ready-made baby and toddler foods are tightly regulated in Australia

The majority of Australian parents hold the misbelief that ready-made baby and toddler foods are tightly regulated by government. Sixty per cent believe there are laws about what can be put in ready-made food for babies and toddlers to ensure that it is healthy, and 53% think there are laws making sure ready-made foods provide good nutrition for babies and toddlers.

Forty-one per cent of parents say that ready-made baby and toddler foods must be healthy or else the government wouldn't allow them to be sold in the shops.

Parents support the regulation of ready-made baby and toddler foods

Nine out of ten (87%) parents recognise that eating habits in early childhood have a life-long impact on health and the vast majority of parents (>85%) support regulation of the content of baby and toddler foods, as well as regulation of the marketing and claims on the packaging (see figure 4). There was no meaningful difference for the levels of support for regulation of baby foods, as compared with toddler foods.

9 in 10 parents

would support laws to regulate the contents and marketing of ready-made baby and toddler foods



Level of support for specific laws about ready-made baby and toddler foods

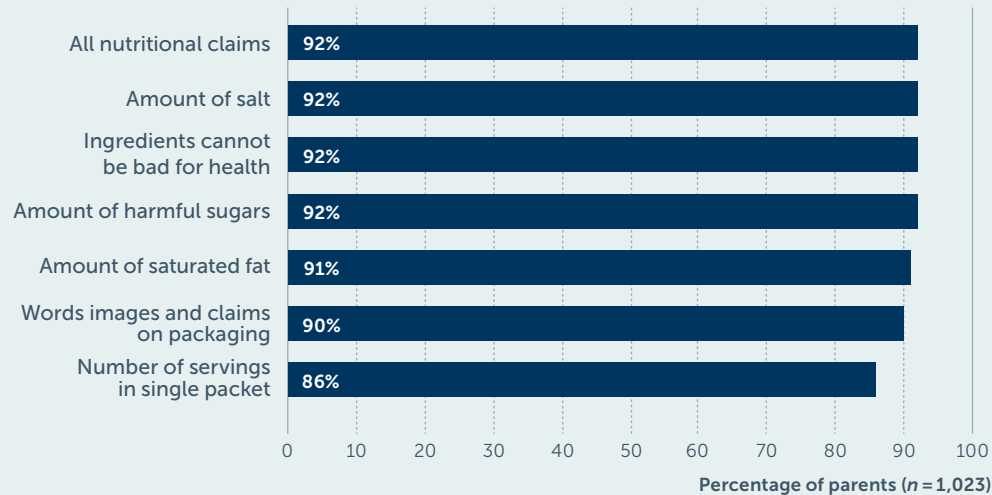


Figure 4.

Implications

Parents recognise the importance of food choices for children early in life and are keen to make informed, healthy choices. Consumption of ready-made baby and toddler food products is very common, with one in five babies and toddlers having ready-made foods most days of the week. Convenience is the biggest driver for use of ready-made foods, with many parents saying they are time poor and unable to provide home-made foods even if they want to. Perhaps the most striking finding in this study is the large proportion of parents that choose ready-made foods for their young children because they believe it to be a healthy choice, and in many cases believe it is healthier or at least as healthy as home-made food. Contributing to this concept is the misbelief held by one in four parents that toddlers have unique nutritional needs and require different food from the rest of the family.

The vast majority of parents are in support of laws to regulate the contents and marketing of baby and toddler foods. Currently in Australia, these products are not sufficiently regulated with little regulation in place for the contents of baby products and no specific regulations for the contents of toddler products. This leaves parents vulnerable to misinformation and making underinformed choices for their children. Many ready-made baby and toddler foods are highly processed and contain high levels of harmful sugars, including from concentrated fruit ingredients.

These products may be marketed as healthy and natural, misleading parents and posing a risk to the health of young children.

Being exposed early to sweet tasting foods can affect a child's taste preferences, putting them at risk of ongoing high sugar intake and related health impacts. Regular consumption of harmful sugars increases a child's risk of tooth decay and unhealthy weight gain.

This study highlights that ready-made food products are a common part of the diet of many young children in Australia, as busy families increasingly rely on convenient options. When choosing these products, parents are heavily influenced by marketing claims that imply the products are a healthy choice for children. Efforts should be made to support parents by raising awareness about the contents of ready-made foods and the lack of government regulations. The contents and marketing of these products must be adequately regulated to prevent use of misleading information and allow parents to make informed choices about what they feed their children. Readily accessible and clear information about added sugars, including naturally sourced sugars, needs to be on packaging of ready-made food products to support parents to make healthy choices for their children and reduce the risk of harm from consumption of these products.

Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative (by age, sex and state of residence) household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 20–28 July, 2021, to a randomly selected, stratified sample of Australian adults aged 18 and older (n = 1,023).

All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between birth and less than five years. Respondents provided data on a collective total of 1,210 children aged four months to five years. The sample was subsequently weighted by age, sex, state of residence, number of children, Indigenous status, socio economic status (using Socio-economic Indexes for Areas, SEIFA) and remoteness to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among eligible Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 65%.

Survey participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs in relation to purchasing and use of ready-made food products for their children. A copy of the survey can be found on the [RCH Poll website](#).

References



For a full list of references please email child.healthpoll@rch.org.au

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