

Soy Based Formula

Advice from the UK Department of Health

UK DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

96/244

18 July 1996

ADVICE ON SOYA-BASED INFANT FORMULAE

The Department of Health is today issuing advice on soya-based infant formulae which contain naturally occurring chemicals, phytoestrogens. Parents who have been advised on medical grounds to give their babies soya-based formulae should continue to do so.

The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT), made up of independent experts, has advised that phytoestrogens can, in certain situations, behave like a very weak form of the female hormone oestrogen. In animals this has caused some fertility problems. But there is no evidence of adverse effects in populations which eat large quantities of soya such as the Japanese and Chinese. The Committee has recommended that further research is needed to give a better understanding of the actions of phytoestrogens in the human body.

One per cent of babies are fed soya-based infant formulae because they are not being breast fed and cannot take formulae based on cows' milk. Most babies are fed this formulae on the advice of doctors, health visitors or other health care professionals. In addition, some parents choose to feed this formulae to their babies as soya-based formulae are made wholly from plant material and are acceptable to vegans and other groups who do not wish to feed their baby on cows' milk products.

Until the results of further research are available the Department of Health advice is:

- Babies being fed soya-based formulae on the advice of a doctor, health visitor or other health care professional should continue to be given it.
- Parents who have not been advised but have chosen to give their baby soya-based formulae should continue to feed their baby on the formulae but seek advice from their doctor, health visitor or other health care professional.
- Breast feeding is the best way of feeding infants and can help prevent allergies. Infant formulae provide an alternative source of nutrition and formulae based on cow's milk are preferable for most bottle-fed babies.

NOTES:

1. Phytoestrogens are widely distributed, naturally occurring plant chemicals found, for example, in peas and green beans, which have a weak oestrogenic activity. One class of phytoestrogens, isoflavones, occurs in soya beans and consequently in soya-based infant formulae (baby milk).
2. Other soya-based products are available for all age groups. Where soya is not the

- sole source of nutrition, intakes of phytoestrogens are likely to be low.
3. COT recently reviewed the health aspects of phytoestrogens as part of on-going programme of reviews of naturally occurring chemicals and concluded that there was a need for further research.
 4. Some of this research is already underway, both here and abroad. COT will review the results as they become available.
 5. Members of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) are appointed by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). The Committees advise the CMO and, through the CMO, the Government. Committee members are appointed as independent scientific and medical experts on the basis of their special skills and knowledge.
 6. The current Chairman of the COT is Professor H Frank Woods BSc MB BCh MRCP D Phil FRCP(Lon) FFPM FRCP(Edin), who is the Head of the Department of Medicine & Pharmacology and Therapeutics at the University of Sheffield.