

A Profile of Flavourings in Commercial Complementary Foods for Infants and Young Children in South Africa

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Abstract

Introduction: Existing literature suggests exposure to flavourings in commercial complementary foods (CCFs) for infants and young children (IYC) may have similar consequences as the high sugar content of these products. While extensive research has been done on sugar in CCFs, little is known about flavourings in these products.

This study aimed to create a profile of the prevalence and type (taste, flavour, and nature) of flavourings in CCFs for IYC in South Africa (SA).

Methods: A cross-sectional, descriptive study was conducted on CCFs for IYC aged 6 to 23 months, available on the SA retail market. Data was collected at 26 stores (supermarkets, hypermarkets, pharmacies, and baby chain stores) in the Western Cape, and nine online stores of the major retailers in SA between June 2022 and February 2023. Product labels were photographed to capture the relevant information and CCF manufacturers were contacted for further information on the flavourings in these products. Data was analysed using a type of descriptive statistics called frequency distribution.

Results and Discussion: Thirty-six percent (n=145) of the 401 CCFs included in the study contained flavourings, of which 75.9% contained only one flavouring, and the rest up to three flavourings. More than half (52.4%) of the products that contained flavourings were marketed as suitable for introduction from 6 months. Almost half (48.6%; n=17) of the baby drinks, all indicated for introduction from 6 months, contained flavourings. Flavourings were present in 84.2% (n=80) of dry baby foods (cereals/porridges). The majority (96.6%) of CCFs that contained flavourings were sweet tasting. Eighty percent (n=148) of flavourings in CCFs were sweet, with vanilla as the most prevalent flavour. Only 51% of the products complied with all SA labelling regulations relating to flavourings and 78.3% violated labelling regulations relating to composition/nutrition claims.

Conclusions: The baby food market in SA is characterised by predominantly sweet CCFs high in sugar and a high prevalence of flavourings. This may negatively affect taste and food preferences, dietary habits, and health outcomes during childhood and in later life. There is a need to re-evaluate the use of flavourings in CCFs and enforce labelling regulations.