

## Neonatology

# Plant-based formula milks

## Information for parents and carers

### Introduction

Parents and carers wishing their babies to follow a vegan diet are strongly encouraged to breast milk feed.

However, there are some options to consider if you:

- choose not to breast feed
- are unable to breast feed
- are not able to express enough breast milk to meet your baby's needs

Currently, there are no baby formulas available for sale in the UK that are 100% vegan. Although some formulas do not contain animal-derived milk products (for example: rice or soy-based formula), the vitamin D added to these formulas (vitamin D3) may come from sheep's wool (lanolin).

If you have decided you would like to give your baby a plant-based formula, there are several factors to consider while your baby is an inpatient and once at home.

### Milk-kitchen facilities

We have very limited milk-kitchen facilities on the neonatal units and the post-natal wards at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust (ICHNT).

As a result, we do not usually accept any powdered formula milk on the unit. The only exceptions are those needed for babies with specific medical conditions where a ready-to-feed (liquid) version of the required formula milk does not exist. (for example, babies with liver problems, allergies or severe feed intolerances). This is because ready-to-feed formula milks better protect against infection. We use these for all other babies receiving formula milk in the hospital.

### Rice-based formula

Currently, the sale of rice-based infant formula in the UK has not been approved. This is despite it being available in Europe. However, we would like to respect your choices about your baby's milk, so if you provide your own rice-milk based infant formula milk we may be able to make this up for your baby.

If your baby was born prematurely, please note:

- rice-milk based formula milks are not designed to meet the enhanced needs of premature babies
- formula milks designed for premature babies would better meet their nutritional needs

## Soy-based formula

The British Dietetic Association (BDA) Paediatric Group recommend the '*use of a soy based infant formula... should be discouraged during the first six months of life*'. This is a precautionary measure due to concerns about the amount of phytoestrogens (isoflavones) in soy-based formula milks. There are concerns that these could have long-term effects if consumed during infancy.

These potential long-term effects include:

- in adult women: an increase in prolonged and painful periods (menstruation)
- in men: suppressed male hormone (testosterone)

More research is needed on the safety of soy-based infant formulas. But the BDA Paediatric Group recommendations are in line with what other nutritional bodies say. These bodies include:

- American Academy of Paediatric (AAP, 2008)
- Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer products and the Environment (COT, 2003)
- European Society for Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (ESPGHAN, 2006)
- Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN, 2018)

For **premature** babies, soy-based infant formulas are not recommended.

For **term** babies, soy-based formula could be an appropriate choice once your baby is over 6 months of age. This is because it is possible that there are reduced risks after 6 months of age as the phytoestrogens per kg body weight will be lower when formula intake decreases, and solid food intake increases. Your baby's organ systems that are potentially vulnerable are also likely to have matured. This reduces the long-term risk of harm. However, we would like to respect your choices with regards to your baby's milk, so if you provide your own soy-based infant formula milk we may be able to make this up for your term baby.

## Donor breast milk

While ICHNT has a donor milk bank for those babies born very early or very sick, the mothers who donate breast milk are likely eating a diet containing animal products. Vegan donors cannot be identified for your baby and as such donor breast milk is not vegan.

## Useful resources

[First Steps Nutrition Trust – Eating well: vegan infants and under 5s](#)

## How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at [imperial.pals@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.pals@nhs.net) The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street  
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Email: [ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net](mailto:ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net)

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

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