

Added Sugar and Salt in Foods for Babies



What Counts as Added Sugar and Salt?

Added sugar is sugar incorporated into a food or drink during processing, preparation, or cooking. It includes ingredients such as table sugar, syrups, molasses, glucose, fructose, and concentrated sweeteners used to make a product taste sweeter. It is distinct from the naturally occurring sugar in whole fruit, vegetables, or plain milk.

Salt is the common dietary source of sodium chloride. Sodium is an essential nutrient in small amounts, but infants generally need very little. In practical terms, added salt includes salt stirred into a puree, sprinkled on food, used in cooking water, or present in salty packaged foods. Nutrition labels may list sodium rather than salt, so caregivers should check both the ingredient list and the nutrition information when available.

Some foods taste sweet or savory without containing added sugar or salt. Mashed banana, roasted squash, ripe pear, plain yogurt, herbs, garlic, and mild spices can provide flavor while preserving the food's original sensory profile. The central distinction is between flavor that comes naturally from a nutritious food and sweetening or salting added to intensify taste.

Why Babies Should Avoid Added Sugar

Guidance from the CDC and NHS advises that babies should not have added sugar. Infants have small stomachs and high nutrient needs relative to their size. A sweetened drink, dessert, cereal, snack, or yogurt can provide energy without supplying comparable amounts of iron, protein, fiber, or other nutrients needed during complementary feeding.

Early feeding is also a period of sensory learning. Repeated exposure to very sweet foods may make naturally mild foods seem less appealing by comparison. This does not mean that one taste of a sweet food determines a child's future diet, nor does it justify anxiety about an accidental exposure. Rather, offering unsweetened foods routinely gives a baby more opportunities to learn that vegetables, grains, legumes, fruit, and plain dairy foods can be enjoyable without added sweeteners.

Fruit juice and sweetened drinks deserve particular caution. They can deliver concentrated sugar without the intact fiber and chewing experience of whole fruit. Sweetened products may also become a substitute for breast milk, infant formula, or water when developmentally appropriate. Caregivers can usually meet a baby's need for pleasant flavors by using naturally sweet foods, such as mashed fruit or cooked root vegetables, without adding sugar, honey, syrups, or other sweeteners.

Why Salt Is Limited in Infant Foods

The NHS advises that babies should not eat much salt and that salt should not be added to food or cooking water. Infants' kidneys are still developing and are less able to handle a high sodium load than those of older children and adults. This is one reason ordinary family foods may need modification before they are offered to a baby.

Salt is often present in foods that do not taste extremely salty, including bread, crackers, cheese, stock cubes, gravy, canned soups, processed meats, sauces, instant noodles, and convenience meals. The cumulative amount can matter even when no one deliberately salts the baby's portion. A product marketed for children is not automatically low in sodium, so label reading remains useful.

Salt is not required to make infant food nutritious or appetizing. Babies can experience the flavors of vegetables, meat, fish, beans, grains, and eggs without added salt. Fresh or frozen ingredients without sauces are often easier to control. When sharing a family meal, set aside the baby's portion before adding salt or salty seasonings, and use herbs, lemon, garlic, onion, or mild spices to develop flavor for the rest of the household.

Common Sources in Baby and Family Foods

Added sugar and salt can enter an infant's diet through foods that appear convenient, wholesome, or small enough for a baby. Sweetened infant cereals, flavored yogurt, biscuits, rusks, dessert-style purees, cereal bars, and sweet drinks may contain added sugar. Salty sources include processed meats, savory snack foods, packaged sauces, bouillon, instant meals, salted spreads, and some ready-made family foods.

Food labels can help identify less obvious ingredients. For sugar, look for words such as syrup, cane sugar, glucose, fructose, dextrose, malt, or honey. Honey also requires separate age-specific safety precautions and should not be given before 12 months because of the risk of infant botulism. For salt, review the sodium value and ingredients such as salt, monosodium glutamate, soy sauce, brine, and stock.

Commercial baby foods vary in composition. A pouch or jar may be useful on occasion, but caregivers can compare products and favor options with no added sugar or salt when possible. Texture, allergen safety, storage, and nutritional adequacy also matter. For broader guidance on How to introduce new foods safely, families should consider developmental readiness, safe preparation, and responsive feeding rather than focusing on one ingredient alone.

Building Flavor Without Sugar or Salt

Babies can be offered a wide range of naturally flavorful foods in developmentally appropriate forms. Soft cooked vegetables, ripe fruit, oats, unsalted beans, lentils, eggs, plain full-fat yogurt, fish, poultry, and tender meat can contribute different tastes and nutrients. Iron-rich complementary foods are especially important once solids become a regular part of the diet,

because an infant's iron requirements are substantial during this period.

Cooking methods influence flavor. Roasting or steaming can bring out the natural sweetness of vegetables, while combining a mild food with a more aromatic one can increase variety. Herbs and mild spices may be used in small amounts when appropriate for the family and the baby's tolerance. There is no nutritional requirement to keep every food completely bland, but strongly salted, sweetened, or highly processed foods are best avoided.

Texture must be matched to the baby's developmental abilities. A food can be low in sugar and salt yet still be unsafe if it is hard, round, sticky, or difficult to manage. Safe textures for infant feeding may include smooth purees, mashed foods, soft strips, or appropriately prepared minced foods, depending on age and readiness. Babies should eat seated upright and supervised. Responsive feeding allows the infant to show hunger and satiety cues without pressure to finish a portion.

A Practical Approach for Caregivers

A simple household strategy is to cook a shared meal with no added salt or sugar, remove a suitable portion for the baby, and season the adult portions afterward. This can reduce separate cooking and helps the child participate in family meals. Keep plain ingredients available, such as unsalted frozen vegetables, oats, beans, eggs, fruit, and plain yogurt. Reading labels before shopping can also reduce reliance on products with hidden sodium or sweeteners.

Caregivers do not need to eliminate every packaged food or feel guilty about an occasional unplanned taste. Dietary patterns develop over time. The most useful routine is consistent access to varied, nutritious foods and limited access to foods designed to be very sweet or salty. It is also reasonable to ask a health visitor, pediatrician, family doctor, or registered dietitian about culturally important foods and how to adapt them safely.

Individual circumstances may require tailored advice. Babies with poor growth, feeding difficulties, kidney disease, metabolic conditions, food allergies, or medically prescribed diets should be managed with their clinical team. Advice about sugar and salt should be integrated with guidance on breast milk or formula, iron, allergens, choking prevention, hydration, and developmental

readiness.