Home-cooked meals for babies is 'NOT always better than shop-bought'

PUBLISHED: 23:30, Tue, Jul 19, 2016

HOME-made meals for babies and toddlers are not always better than shop-bought ones, researchers say.

A study found that while home-cooking costs half the price, such meals actually contain almost treble the levels of saturated fat and treble the salt compared with shop-bought food.

Experts also found a greater vegetable variety per meal in ready-made foods, despite a broader range of ingredients overall included in home-cooked recipes.

However, home-made meals were found to be more nutritious overall than meals from leading brands, although experts said parents should not rule out shop-bought meals as they can provide a “convenient alternative”.

The research, from experts at the University of Aberdeen and the University of Warwick, compared the nutrient content, price, and food group variety of home-made meals with shop-bought savoury main meals aimed at under-fives.

It included 278 ready-made savoury meals (174 of which were organic), and 408 home-cooked meals made using recipes from 55 bestselling cookbooks for babies and young children.

The pre-prepared meals were from all major infant and toddler brands and were sold in Asda, Tesco, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Aldi, Lidl, Boots and Superdrug.

Writing in the journal Archives of Disease in Childhood, the experts found the average cost of commercial meals was “significantly higher” (£0.68 per 100g) than home-cooked recipes (£0.33 per 100g).

Both commercial and home-cooked poultry-based mealsmostly used chicken (92% and 90.8% respectively), while beef was the main red meat offering in both home-made and shop-bought meals.

Salmon was the main fish used in shop-bought meals but cod was more often used at home. A greater selection of red meat and fish and seafood was used at home, and home-cooked recipes used a wider range of vegetables overall.

But shop-bought meals typically contained three types of vegetables per meal compared with two in home-cooked meals.

But home-cooked meals had more nutrients, although half exceeded the calorie requirements for a single meal and 37% exceeded the recommendation on calories from fat.

Researchers concluded: “The majority of commercial meals met energy density recommendations and can provide a convenient alternative which includes a greater vegetable variety per meal.

“Home-cooked recipes provided 6%-77% more nutrients than commercial, however the majority of these recipes exceeded energy density and fat recommendations.

Home-cooked recipes also contained more sugar (2.5g vs 2.2g per 100g), with much higher levels of salt (0.24g vs 0.08g per 100g), double the protein and twice the amount of fat (4.4g vs 2.2g per 100g) and almost treble the saturated fat (1.5g vs 0.6g per 100g).

“Dietary fats contribute essential fatty acids and fat soluble vitamins together with energy and sensory qualities, thus are vital for the growing child, however excessive intakes may impact on childhood obesity and health.“

In 2013, research published in the same journal found that baby foods made by firms including Cow and Gate, Heinz and Ella's Kitchen have far fewer nutrients than home-made meals.

It said many contain high levels of sugar and some are promoted for use from four months of age - a time when babies should still be on a diet of breast or formula milk.

Babies would need to eat twice as much shop-bought food to get the same energy and protein as meals cooked at home, researchers from the University of Glasgow concluded.

Current guidelines encourage weaning from six months of age, with babies fed only breast or formula milk before this time.