**Homemade baby food worse than store bought**

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Preparing a nutritious homemade meal for your baby or toddler may seem like the best way to give them a healthy start in life. But home cooking tends to contain far more fat, calories and salt than pre- packaged children's foods sold in the shops, researchers have found.

Experts at Aberdeen and Warwick universities found that while home-cooked meals cost half the price of those in supermarkets, they contain almost treble the levels of saturated fat and treble the salt.

The research team also found ready meals aimed at babies, toddlers and under-fives contained a greater variety of vegetables.

Homemade meals were found to be more nutritious overall than meals from leading brands and relied less heavily on beef and other red meat. But the researchers said the fat levels were of concern.

Experts are increasingly interested in the food that babies are fed in their first years in life, warning that these early meals inform the tastes and habits that will last a lifetime.

The researchers, whose work is published in the journal BMJ Archives of Disease in Childhood, analysed the nutrient content, price and food group variety of 278 ready-made meals sold in Asda, Tesco, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Aldi, Lidl, Boots and Superdrug.

They compared these to 408 home-cooked meals, made using recipes from 55 cookbooks designed for the diets of babies and toddlers.

The team found that home-cooked recipes contained much higher levels of salt, double the protein, twice the levels of all fats and almost treble the saturated fat.

They also provided 26 per cent more calories than ready meals, on average, with half exceeding the calorie requirements for a single meal.

Shop-bought meals typically contained three types of vegetables per meal compared with two in home-cooked meals. But home-cooked meals had a greater variety of nutrients, in all, and were more likely to include fish.

The researchers, whose work was funded by the Scottish Government, wrote: "Evidence suggests that the development of taste preference begins in childhood and by repeated exposure we can encourage the acceptance of food."

They added: "The majority of commercial meals met energy density recommendations and can provide a convenient alternative which includes a greater vegetable variety per meal." But they warned that relying solely on commercial food may not be advisable.

The research, however, contradicts findings published by Glasgow University last year, which found that many commercial baby foods are so sweet that toddlers never learn to appreciate bitter flavours.

Even products which say they contain lots of vegetables are packed with the sweeter varieties such as carrot and sweet potato.

Experts last night said that the problem may be the recipes that the authors of the new research followed and they questioned whether many parents actually used them.

Professor Neena Modi, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said: "To ensure toddlers get the best start in life, it is important they eat a balanced diet."

- [Daily Mail](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/)