**Home cooked meals not healthier than prepackaged food for young children, UK study**

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To all the busy parents making a frantic dash down the ready-made meal aisle: you're doing just fine.

A new study found those commercially prepared meals you might feel a little guilty about buying for your infant or young children are not necessarily any less healthy than home-cooked fare.

Home-cooked meals have become a paragon of modern parenting, with Instagram and social media mothers groups curating images of delicious dinners and creative lunches like fine art.

But a UK study released Wednesday found the commercially available pre-packaged offerings were more closely aligned to some nutritional guidelines.

Home-cooked meals usually exceeded energy density and dietary fat recommendations, found the researched published in the [*Archives of Disease in Childhood*](http://adc.bmj.com/).

The researchers from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland investigated how judiciously homemade and commercially available ready-made meals for infants and young children met age specific national dietary recommendations.

[Australian and UK guidelines](https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n56b_infant_feeding_summary_130808.pdf) recommend solid foods should be introduced around six months to meet an infant's growing nutritional and developmental needs.

The study compared the nutrient content, price, and food group breakdown of 278 ready-made savoury meals (174 organic) readily available throughout the UK, to 408 home-cooked meals made using recipes from 55 bestselling cookbooks for infants and young children.

Close to two-thirds of store-bought meals met the dietary recommendations for energy density compared to just over one-third of home-cooked meals. More than half of the home-cooked meals exceeded the maximum range.

Homemade recipes had slightly higher sugar content with 2.5 grams compared to 2.2 grams per 100 grams in commercially made products.

Home-cooked meals had a wider variety of vegetables, with a total of 33 compared to 22 among the ready-made selection.

But the ready-made meals had a greater vegetable variety per meal, averaging three compared with two for home-cooked recipes.

Compared to the store-bought meals, home recipes provided 26 per cent more energy, and 44 per cent more protein and total fat.

But home-cooked meals were around half the price of their counterparts, excluding the cost of driving the family car to the supermarket.

"Unlike adult recommendations, which encourage reducing energy density and fats, it is important in infants that food is suitably energy dense in appropriately sized meals to aid growth and development," the researchers said.

"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."

The lower protein content of ready made meals may be due to the higher proportion of early stage meals on the market aimed at infants, which are predominantly vegetable-based as recommended.

The results did not take into account parents' who might choose to vary the home cooked recipes, the authors said.

They concluded ready-made meals offered parents a convenient alternative, but warned against relying too much on a monotonous diet of store bought goodies.

They stressed a varied diet was best for a child's development and nutrition.

"The high proportion of red meat-based meals and recipes and low seafood meals are of concern when dietary recommendations encourage an increase in oil-rich fish consumption and limitation of red and processed meats," the authors concluded.

(It is worth noting the study was partly funded by Scotland's Seafish Authority.)