Home cooking 'less healthy' than infant ready meals

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Parents who cook “healthy” food from recipe books for young children might be better advised to serve ready meals, scientists have warned.

Half of the recipes contained too many calories and could help lead to childhood obesity and poor health, they concluded.

Researchers at the [University of Aberdeen](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/) compared 408 recipes from the 55 bestselling cookbooks for infants and compared them to 278 children’s meals from major supermarkets across the UK.

Parenting experts recommend the introduction of solid foods at six months old and suggest that meals should include a variety of food to provide a balanced diet rich in a broad range of nutrients.

Home cooked meals were found to provide 26 per cent more energy and 44 per cent more protein and total fat, including saturated fat, than commercial products.

While almost two thirds of commercial products met dietary recommendations on energy density, only around a third of home cooked meals did. Over half exceeded the maximum calorie range however they were between six and 77 per  cent more nutritious.

 “The majority of commercial meals met energy recommendations and can provide a convenient alternative which includes a greater vegetable variety per meal,” said lead author Sharon Carstairs of the Health Services Research Unit at Aberdeen.

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

“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.”

However, home-cooked meals were found to be cheaper, costing just 33p per 100g compared with 68p for supermarket meals.

Prof Julian Hamilton-Shield, Professor of Diabetes and Metabolic Endocrinology, [University of Bristol](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/), said that many parents did not relay on cookery books to produce healthy meals for their children.

“This research study examined the nutrient quality of commercial ready prepared meals and commercial recipe book meals.

“This is not really the same as comparing to home cooked meals produced by parents (as the authors do point out). It is very likely that infant-specific, commercial recipe books are only accessed by a minority of families cooking at home for their infants.

“If anything, the study does call into question the value of 'expert' infant recipe books over pre-prepared meals or ordinary home cooking. ”

The research was published in the journal [Archives of Disease in Childhood.](http://adc.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/archdischild-2015-310098)