Shop-bought meals 'healthier for infants than homemade ones'

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Home-prepared dishes may be cheaper to put together but may lead to young children gaining weight, new study finds

Meals which parents make at home for their baby or toddler are often less healthy and more likely to lead to their child gaining weight than shop-bought ones, a new study has found.

Home-prepared dishes may be cheaper to put together but they usually contain more fat and are more energy-dense than health guidelines recommend, British researchers have found.

Their results, published in the [Archives of Disease in Childhood](http://adc.bmj.com/) medical journal, have reopened the debate about what foods parents should give infants once they start weaning, in order to promote their physical and mental development.

In findings that may surprise many parents, researchers at Aberdeen University led by Sharon Carstairs, reported: “The majority of commercial meals provided an energy-dense meal with greater vegetable variety per meal to their home-cooked counterparts. Home-cooked recipes provided a cheaper meal option; however, the majority exceeded recommendations for energy and fats.”

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They reached their conclusions after comparing the cost and nutritional content of shop-bought products compared to homemade meals. They studied 278 ready-made savoury meals aimed at children under the age of five bought in supermarkets and a leading pharmacy chain, of which 174 were organic; and 408 home-cooked meals from 55 cookbooks aimed specifically at infants and young children.

Meals from commercial outlets were by far the most expensive, at 68p per 100g, compared to just 33p per 100g for home-cooked dishes.

Nutritionally there were pros and cons with both types of meals. “Home-cooked recipes contained 51% more energy than commercial products [and] contained higher carbohydrate, salt, protein, total fat and saturated fat compared with their commerical counterparts providing 7%-200% more nutrients”, the study said.

But home-cooked meals contained slightly more sugar than shop-bought dishes: 2.5% versus 2.2% when the same recipes were compared. And while 65% of commercial products were no more energy dense than guidelines advise, 50% of the recipe book meals contained more energy than is regarded as wise.

“Home-cooked recipes provided 26% more energy and 44% more protein and total fat than commercial products, while costing less,” the researchers found. They said dietary fats “are vital for the growing child. However, excessive intakes may impact on childhood obesity and health.”

Homemade children’s meals tended to contain more protein and also a wider range of vegetables. “For parents concerned with providing a varied diet, if the parent relied solely on the commercial market then it is likely that the child would be exposed to a lower overall range of food types in terms of vegetables, meats and fish options”, the authors found.

Louis Levy, head of nutrition science at Public Health England, said: “Offering a variety of tastes and textures is important, as is not adding salt or sugar to home cooking and checking labels on manufactured foods. Between the ages of two and five, children should gradually move to eating the same foods as the rest of the family, as in the [Eatwell Guide](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide).”

“This study shows that not only are regulatory standards necessary for commercial products, but also that parents and carers are supported to be nutritionally aware,” said Professor Neena Modi, the president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

“If anything, the study does call into question the value of ‘expert’ infant recipe books over pre-prepared meals or ordinary home cooking,” said Julian Hamilton-Shield, professor of diabetes and metabolic endocrinology at Bristol University.