

Naturally, there are some caveats. The first is that our understanding of phthalates is still evolving, so it's possible that the acceptable threshold may decrease as we learn more. And it's true that the important thing may not be how much we're exposed to, but when we're exposed to it. An adult who has fully developed is likely less sensitive to the effects of phthalates than a fetus or an infant, whose development can be fundamentally changed by hormonal disruptions.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) already sets a much lower threshold for the level of phthalates an infant should consume—just .02 milligrams a day per kilogram of body weight. If your average four-month-old infant scarfed down an entire box of the powdered stuff, he or she could indeed exceed that limit. But if your four-month-old has jumped right from their first taste of solid food to consuming an entire box of mac-n-cheese a day, you probably have other concerns. Your typical two-year-old—a demographic with more cause for concern—would have to eat five boxes to exceed the EPA's safe dosage. Toddlers may love their powdered cheese, but are they regularly eating thousands of calories' worth in a single day? Again, we're concerned, and it's not because of your tyke's phthalate exposure.

The real issue is that these chemicals are ubiquitous, so mac-n-cheese is likely not your only source of exposure. If you wear perfume, wash your clothes with detergents containing fragrance, breathe while inside a room with vinyl floors, eat a container of jelly, or chow down on a carton of vegan ice cream, you're probably getting some phthalates, too.