

Study Finds most British Babies Eat Processed Snacks before Age One

Researchers investigated the factors that drive caregivers and parents in the United Kingdom to provide their young children with [processed snack foods](#). They found that most parents routinely used these snacks to soothe, distract, or entertain babies.

Caregivers found them convenient and were strongly influenced by [brand messaging](#) and packaging, suggesting that clearer labeling and marketing could help parents adopt healthier habits. The study also notes that less than 14% of parents correctly identified 12 months as the recommended minimum age to introduce snacks, while 72% believed it was younger, highlighting a significant knowledge gap potentially shaped by marketing.

The research also highlights the prevalence of the “[health halo effect](#),” where marketing claims, such as “one of your 5 a day,” create a misleading impression of nutritional value.



Study

In this study, researchers aimed to quantify how common these snacks are in infants' [diets](#) and to determine when parents typically introduce them.

An online survey targeted parents of children aged 6–23 months living in the UK. It was developed to address [knowledge](#) gaps and informed by a parent advisory group. Questions covered general feeding habits, when and how snack foods are offered, and what influences product choices.

The survey also included a separate experiment on [food packaging](#), which is not discussed in this context. Participants were recruited through an online panel, with quotas in place to ensure a socioeconomically diverse sample representative of UK households. In total, 1,237 parents participated, evenly split between those with babies aged 6 to 11 months and toddlers aged 12 to 23 months.

Focus groups provided deeper insights into parents' attitudes and the reasons behind their choices. Five focus groups were held, with 22 parents recruited through posters and [newsletters](#), and asked to share photos of baby foods they found interesting. Most survey and focus group participants were mothers. While the survey sample reflected a range of backgrounds, the focus group participants tended to be more educated and affluent, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Results

Most survey participants were mothers, with a broad range of [household incomes](#), ethnicities, and ages. Similarly, focus group participants were mostly mothers from diverse backgrounds, and their discussions lasted about 74 minutes each.

Survey data showed that giving processed baby snack foods is very common: about 84% of parents reported giving these snacks between meals, rising to over 87% among those whose babies had started weaning. Even among infants as young as 6–7 months, nearly three-quarters were receiving these snacks. Over half of parents also gave these products as part of a meal, reflecting how embedded they are in infant diets. Many parents also use these products during [meals](#).

Most babies were first given snacks between 6 and 11 months, though almost 30% had tried them before 6 months. Many parents admitted to offering snacks to occupy or [soothe](#) their baby, not just for hunger. Nearly two-thirds of survey participants agreed they would give a snack to keep a child quiet if they needed to make a phone call, illustrating that snacks are often used in response to non-hunger cues.

Focus groups echoed this, revealing three key reasons: snacks are considered safe and normal baby food, used to calm or entertain children, and valued for convenience, especially outside the home, due to their [portability](#) and low mess. Some parents expressed concerns that frequent use of snacks for soothing or distraction may lead to the establishment of habits associated with poorer diet quality or excess weight later in life.

The “health halo effect” was also discussed, as parents were often influenced by positive on-pack claims, sometimes overlooking high sugar content and other less [healthy ingredients](#).

When choosing products, parents prioritized perceived health benefits and trusted brands with clear, reassuring on-pack claims, like ‘[organic](#).’ On-pack claims, such as “nutritionist approved” or endorsements from health professionals, were seen as especially persuasive; however, the study notes that such claims may not always align with professional codes of conduct.

Peer influence, children’s preferences, and cost also shaped choices, with many parents [balancing quality](#) and affordability by switching brands based on deals or promotions.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study highlights that baby snack foods are widely accepted in the UK as a normal part of infants’ diets, often introduced well before the recommended age of 12 months. Parents commonly use these snacks not just to satisfy hunger but also to soothe, entertain, or manage behavior, reinforcing snacking in response to [non-hunger cues](#).

Choices are heavily influenced by trusted brands, appealing on-pack claims, and convenience. The high level of trust in brands and widespread use of baby snack foods may be partly due to marketing that presents these products as “[nutritionist approved](#)” or endorsed by experts, which the authors caution requires greater regulatory oversight.

The normalization of processed snack use, reinforced by [marketing practices](#) and on-pack claims, poses ongoing challenges for public health efforts.

A key strength is the combination of a large survey and in-depth focus groups, capturing diverse parental views. However, the study lacked data on snack frequency and parent motives, and focus group participants tended to be more [educated](#) and affluent, which may limit generalisability.

The findings suggest a need for clearer public [health messaging](#) to counteract misleading marketing and discourage the use of snacks for non-nutritive reasons. Raising parental awareness of the potential risks of habituating babies to snacking for reasons other than hunger could support healthier eating patterns.

Future research should examine how family habits, including [sibling behavior](#), shape infant snacking. Greater regulation and honest branding could better support parents in making healthy choices for their children.

Source:

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250623/Most-British-babies-eat-processed-snacks-before-age-one-study-finds.aspx>