

The Data-Driven Guide to Healthy Baby Food

Six tips to reduce babies' exposures to toxic heavy metals in their diet

Toxic heavy metals like lead and arsenic are found in 94% of homemade and store-bought baby foods. They can harm children's ability to learn and increase the risk of cancer. The government hasn't set safety standards for heavy metals in many popular foods. Until they do, there are easy ways to reduce toxic metals in your baby's or toddler's diet.

A healthy mix

1 Is there a food you serve day after day? Add variety instead.

Serving the same food every day for a long time can concentrate one or more contaminants in a child's diet. Rotate it with other healthy foods. **A varied diet of wholesome food** ensures a healthy mix of nutrients, too.

2 Are meals ever skipped? Serve regular meals and snacks.

Meal skipping and fasting is linked to higher blood lead levels in children and greater lead absorption for adults. Serve **regular meals** to help reduce exposure.

3 Next time at the doctor: Ask about iron. Many babies don't get enough.

Babies 6-12 months old need extra iron, from formula, iron-fortified cereal (oatmeal or multi-grain), or other foods. Along with **calcium, zinc, and vitamin C, iron** can help reduce the toxic metals absorbed into the body. Among the many foods rich in these nutrients are beans and lentils, lean red meat, iron-fortified cereal, yogurt and cheese, leafy greens, citrus fruit, strawberries, kiwi, and peppers.

Foods to skip, swap, and serve

4 Skip: 4 rice-based foods contaminated with arsenic

Avoid serving **rice cakes, baby food puff snacks, brown rice with no extra cooking water used, and crisped rice cereal.**

5 Swap: Safer picks.

- **Iron-fortified oatmeal and multi-grain infant cereal** over **rice cereal**, for less arsenic.
- **Frozen banana** or **chilled, peeled cucumber** over **rice-based teething biscuits**, for less arsenic.
- **Whole fruit and purees** over **fruit juice**, for fiber and nutrient upsides.
- **Healthy low-metal snacks** over **puffs and rice cakes**. Recommended: Soft-cooked, diced, or mashed to fit a child's age — Apples, applesauce (unsweetened), bananas, barley with diced vegetables, beans, cheese, grapes (cut lengthwise), hard-boiled eggs, peaches, and yogurt.
- **A variety of grains** and **white rice cooked in extra water**, over **rice cooked in just enough water**, for less arsenic.

Tip: Cook rice like pasta, in extra water you pour off before eating to remove over half of the arsenic. Choose basmati rice from California and white over brown for lower metals. Rotate rice with other grains—try amaranth, quinoa, buckwheat, millet, and polenta (all gluten-free), or bulgur, barley, and farro (these contain gluten, a problem for those with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity).

6 Serve: Fruits and vegetables, either baby food brands or homemade, with these tips:

The fruits we tested are low in heavy metals. Vegetables are a daily essential, but some of the most nutritious like carrots and sweet potatoes have more metals.

- To remove surface metals as well as dirt and bacteria, wash all produce under cold running water for 20 seconds, scrubbing tough skins using a vegetable brush or your hands.
- **Carrots and sweet potatoes:** Eat each less than daily; rotate with other vegetables. For homemade purees vary what you buy, choosing different brands or varieties or shopping from different stores each week to avoid accidentally eating a high-metals source often. Peel before serving.
- **Spinach:** Eat less than daily, rotate with other greens, choose **baby spinach**.
- **Squash:** Choose **butternut squash** over **acorn or Hubbard squash** for less cadmium and arsenic.
- And of course, wash hands before eating. It makes a difference. Contaminated dust sticks to babies' hands and ends up in their mouths.

