

Baby Formula Shortage: A Pediatrician's Advice

Across the United States, parents of formula-fed infants are being met with empty store shelves, as a nation-wide shortage of baby formula continues.

In February there was a massive baby formula recall from a major supplier in the U.S., Abbott Nutrition, after reports of infant hospitalizations and two deaths were linked to a bacterial infection stemming from formula. The Michigan-based plant has been shut down since – adding fuel to an already volatile situation, as formula availability was previously strained by supply chain issues.

Dr. Terry Ho is an OSF HealthCare pediatrician. He says he and his peers are getting questions daily from parents wondering what to do if their formula supply dries up completely.

“Definitely it has been an issue, and we're getting a lot of phone calls and contacts from families about what's the next step and what to do. And that's really what we recommend families to do, is contact us. Contact your pediatrician and we can hopefully help guide you on how to manage, and what we can do to help you through this,” says Dr. Ho.

Some parents concerned about their formula supply have resorted to stockpiling formula – buying as much as they can, no matter the brand or type. Many retailers are putting purchase limits in place to discourage formula hoarding. Dr. Ho applauds this effort, as certain specialty formulas are the sole nutrition option for thousands of babies with special medical needs, making an empty formula shelf especially problematic for their parents.

“Some kids with some different medical conditions require a specialty formula, so we don't want to just run out and buy whatever formula is on the shelf. We want you to follow the recommendations, the limitations that are that are being set at stores. I think a lot of stores right now have some limits as to what you can get. And we also want you just to get what you need, because ultimately what we've seen through the pandemic is that a lot of times stockpiling leads to excess anyway, and there are, again, families out there that may need that formula,” he says.

Also concerning - as parents have become more desperate, some are turning to outdated advice or formula recipes they get from family members or find online. Dr. Ho strongly recommends against this. Not only are the at-home recipes lacking in needed nutrition, creating your own formula concoctions could be dangerous.

“Right now we're getting a lot of questions from families about different posts they're seeing on social media. We're seeing a lot of different old recipes for formula that used to be a thing. What we know is that those aren't exactly the best methods and safe methods to feed your child,” warns Dr. Ho. “Formula is a complex blend of nutrients, proteins, minerals, vitamins that are really difficult to duplicate at home. In addition, the formula recall really stemmed from a bacterial contamination that was found in the formula. We run that risk by making formula at home as well. There's a lot of chance that you may contaminate the formula as you're preparing it, and so we really want to shy away from making your own formula.”

Watering down formula to make it last longer can also be a dangerous decision. Too much water in baby formula not only changes its nutritional profile, but also changes the composition of the formula, increasing the risk of causing a harmful electrolyte imbalance in a child.

Cow's milk is a viable option for some children, but Dr. Ho recommends talking to your child's pediatrician before introducing it as part of your child's diet.

“That is something that we want you to contact us with because there is a little bit of a gray zone. We normally recommend holding off on starting milk until your child turns one. But in a situation like this, there may be some children that actually can get that milk a little bit earlier, but we want to help walk you through that and make sure that your child would do well with that and wouldn't have any issues,” says Dr. Ho.

While the Abbott plant is expected to reopen and start production in the coming weeks, a noticeable change to supply could still be months away. Until then, both the Illinois [Department of Human Services](#) and Michigan's [Health and Human Services](#) Department have resources on their websites for parents in search of formula, including specifics for WIC program participants. Dr. Ho says pediatricians are also available to help guide parents through accessing services. The bottom line, he says, is to keep an open line of communication with your child's doctor.

"We want to be your contact for questions about health for your child, both when they're sick or ill, but also on their day-to-day health, which includes their general diet. And so if you have those questions, we want you to reach out. You should be able to reach out to us whether through a phone call or through our MyChart or through the internet, or if you are in the office. These are questions that we receive daily from families, and we want to be able to help guide you through these difficult situations."

If you don't have a pediatrician, you can find one at [osfhealthcare.org](https://www.osfhealthcare.org).