

Follow-on formulas: why they are not necessary and should not be promoted



Follow-on milks - milks for older babies which often share the same brand name as infant formulas - were invented by companies following the adoption of the 1981 *International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes*, in a cynical strategy to get round the Code's restrictions. Follow-on milks are not suitable for young babies yet they are aggressively promoted with TV and media advertising, discounts, prizes and health claims. This causes confusion and tempts parents to use them instead of carrying on breastfeeding or using infant formula.

In 1985 there was an outcry from UK health professionals who noticed that very young babies were being fed on these milks. They feared a return to the days when hypernatraemia was common when all baby milks had high solute loads - like these new milks. European parliamentarians questioned the scientific basis for follow-on milks, calling them '**extremely dubious.**' In 1986 World Health Assembly Resolution (WHA Res 39.28) described them as '**not necessary.**' Despite these concerns companies succeeded in establishing them, first with a Codex Standard in 1987 and then with the European Directives - with no limits on their promotion.

Companies push follow-on milks with the claim that it provides the extra iron older infants need. Iron is of course important for infants, but it is risky to add too much to milk. Ideally babies should carry on breastfeeding or using infant formula, taking in the extra iron from food. The claims used for follow-on milks have yet to be proven and much of the research (funded by industry) compares the formulas to cow's milk rather than infant formula. Follow-on milks can also legally contain higher amounts of sucrose, glucose and other non-milk sugars, and when bottle-fed can increase the risk of dental caries and other problems in older babies. Aware of the risks, some European scientists are urging caution, recommending that the composition of follow-on milks is brought closer to infant formulas. **The nutritional need for follow-on milks remains a mystery. The commercial advantage is clear.**

The International Code, adopted by the World Health Assembly in 1981, prohibits the promotion of all breastmilk substitutes and **"any food being marketed or otherwise represented as a partial or total replacement for breast milk, whether or not suitable for that purpose."** Subsequent WHA Resolutions describe follow-on milks as '**not necessary**' and recommend that infants be exclusively breastfed for 6 months with continued breastfeeding for up to 2 years of age or beyond. **Follow on milks replace that part of the child's diet best provided by breastmilk and are, therefore, breastmilk substitutes.**

Follow-on milks are not necessary and should not be promoted. Labelling should avoid any risk of confusion between infant formulas and follow-on formulas and follow-on milks should not carry any idealised pictures, symbols or text or imply that the product is suitable for use at an inappropriate age.

FOLLOW ON MILK PROMOTION IN THE UK

Below, left and centre: Milupa's advertisements in *Pregnancy and Birth* magazine for parents (April/May 2004) imply that its *Aptamil* formula is equivalent to mother's milk. The *Aptamil* package itself promotes the whole range of milks: 1, 2 and 3. The only identification is the highlighted number. **Below, right:** A similar advertisement appears in *RCM Midwives Journal* (December 2003), but here the 1 and 2 are highlighted on the pack shots. Close examination of the advertisements and packs reveals a difference between the baby image shown. Where the pack is formula number 3, the figure is a human infant. Where it is number 1 (the infant formula) the figure is a humanized bear. All violate the International Code. The adverts blatantly promote 'prebiotics' ingredients that have not yet been proven to be effective or safe in formulas.

