

NEWS

Baby food giants accused of wooing mothers in India off breastfeeding

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London

Large food manufacturers are breaking official rules by tempting mothers away from breastfeeding to give their babies produced food, claims a group of leading charities in India.

The Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI), which promotes breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding, and the International Baby Food Action Network—a network of groups promoting optimal infant and child nutrition—have accused baby food companies Heinz, Nestle, and Abbott of misleading mothers and undermining breastfeeding and natural family foods.

The charities said that the companies were breaching the country's IMS Act (Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution Act, 1992) and Amendment Act 2003.

These companies had been marketing food to women who should be breastfeeding, they said, and called on the Indian government to take more action against illegal practices by food manufacturers.

Heinz, the charities said, was putting profits before children's health by wooing mothers to give its cereal food *Oat and Apple* to children at 4 months plus, through the label on the container and various websites. It was also offering free gifts, discounts, and loyalty schemes to mothers for using the website.

Dr Kunal Bagchi, the World Health Organization's Southeast Asia regional adviser on nutrition, said, "Introducing cereal foods to a child before 6 months of age displaces mother's milk and can lead to serious health risks, including diarrhoea. Babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months."

The charities said that Nestle was using health claims to promote its baby foods *Nan 1* and *Lactogen 1* through various websites

and had tied sales of its *Cerelac Stage 2 Wheat Orange* with baby detergents.

Abbott was using claims of brain development to promote its *Similac advance infant formula stage 1* for babies up to 6 months of age and *Similac infant formula stage 1* for 0-6 months of age, they added.

JP Dadhich, national coordinator of the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India, said that there should be "zero tolerance" of misleading mothers "in the interest of children's health and survival, and the government of India should ensure that such violations end sooner."

Several bottle manufacturers, such as Pigeon, Farlin, Winnie-the-Pooh, Morrison, Baby Dreams, and Mee Mee Feeding Bottles, had been selling bottles and cereal foods on discount on e-marketing websites—a violation of the IMS Act—said the network.

The act bans all kinds of promotion of baby foods and feeding bottles for infants below 2 years of age, including advertisements, inducements on sales, pecuniary benefits to doctors or their associations such as sponsorship, commission to salesmen, and prescribes labelling requirements.

Dr Arun Gupta, a member of the prime minister's Council on India's Nutrition Challenges, said, "This is just a tip of the iceberg. It's high time that the government of India put effective enforcement machinery in place to monitor and implement [the] IMS Act right at the district level and state level."

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