

Television Advertising and Store Availability of Toddler Milks

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Key Findings

- **In 2022, only 2 TV ads per year for toddler milks were seen by adults on average, which represents a 90% decrease from 2013. Infant formulas were barely advertised on TV as adults saw 0-4 ads per year between 2013 and 2022. By contrast, adults saw 15-17 TV ads for infant foods in both 2013 and 2022, with some fluctuations in the intervening years.**
- **75% of 16 sampled stores from a large U.S. metropolitan area offered toddler milks to consumers in 2024. Five stores organized formulas by brand, leading to infant formulas and toddler milks occupying the same shelf space.**
- **Six individual toddler milks were encountered in at least 25% of stores, and they all included added sugars and less protein compared to whole milk.**

Introduction

One in 5 U.S. youths aged 2-19 have obesity.¹ Studies have shown that consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages in infancy is a predictor of later childhood obesity,²⁻⁴ and that eating preferences established during childhood persist into adulthood.^{5,6} This renders caregivers' choices regarding their children's early life dietary habits particularly influential.³ Infant formulas are necessary to meet dietary needs of infants (age 0-12 months) who are not exclusively breastfed, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates their safety, nutritional adequacy, packaging, and labeling.⁷ By contrast, toddler milks, typically packaged as powdered formula, are not necessary to meet the nutritional needs of older babies (age 13-36 months), and do not undergo premarket review by the FDA.⁷ Toddler milk is an ultra-processed beverage which often contains added sugars, and high amounts of saturated fat and sodium.^{8,9} Leading U.S. health organizations including the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Heart Association recommend against serving toddler milk as nutrient requirements should be fulfilled through a well-balanced diet.¹⁰ Moreover, toddler milk is more expensive than regular cow's milk while possessing no nutritional advantage over it.¹⁰

Nevertheless, a recent scoping review on toddler milk found that sales are rapidly increasing around the world and are projected to continue growing in both low- and high-income countries.¹¹ In the U.S., volume sales of toddler milks increased 2.6 times between 2006 and 2015 and were positively associated with advertising spending.¹² Caregivers have been shown to offer toddler milk as they believe it has nutritional and health benefits, which may be explained by deceptive marketing practices.^{11,13} Furthermore, evidence shows that toddler milks are difficult to distinguish from infant formula as advertising and packaging are highly similar.¹¹ Communities of color are more likely to serve toddler milk to their children compared to non-Hispanic White counterparts, which highlights equity concerns as well.¹¹

Given these dynamics, it is paramount to monitor the marketing of toddler milks. This brief provides the most recent available data, to the authors' knowledge, on TV marketing of infant formulas, infant foods, and toddler milks and examines toddler milks available in stores in a large metropolitan area in 2024.

Methods

We use television program ratings data for 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018, and 2022 provided by The Nielsen Company to compute advertisements seen per year by adults age 18 and older for toddler milks and infant formula and foods. The ratings cover exposure among households with televisions from broadcast network, cable network, and syndicated television advertising, as well as spot television advertising shown only to local broadcast markets, from all English- and Spanish-language programming.

We also visited 16 individual stores in the greater Chicago metropolitan area in June and July 2024 including 4 big box retailers (3 chains), 4 pharmacies (2 chains), and 8 supermarkets (4 chains) to identify toddler milks available in stores. These stores were selected as a convenience sample based on their accessibility and location. Calories, saturated fats, protein, carbohydrates, total sugars, added sugars, sodium and ingredient lists were assessed for toddler milk brands that were sold in $\geq 25\%$ of stores and for whole milk (for comparison) using the USDA's Food Data Central, the manufacturer's website or product nutrition facts panels from food labels in person or on grocery store websites.

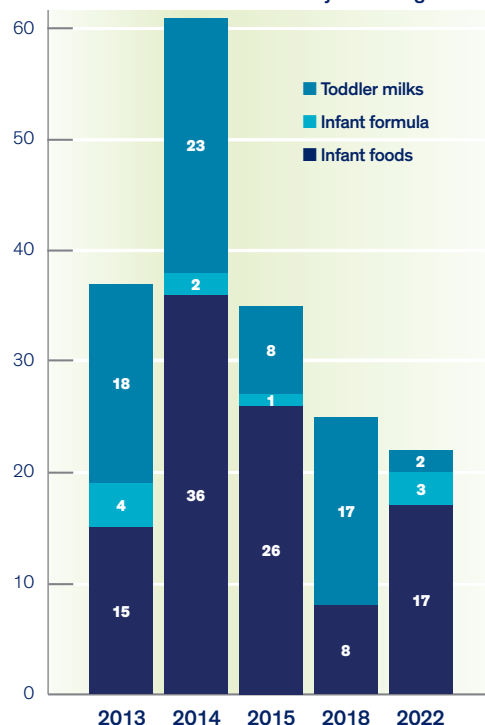
Results

As shown in Figure 1, adults saw 18 TV ads for toddler milks in 2013 on average. In 2022, only 2 TV ads for toddler milks were seen by adults on average, which represents a 90% decrease from 2013. Throughout this period, infant formulas were barely advertised on TV, as adults saw 0-4 ads per year between 2013 and 2022. On the other hand, 15-17 TV ads for infant foods were seen in both 2013 and 2022, with some fluctuations in the intervening years.

Twelve out of 16 sampled stores from a large U.S. metropolitan area offered toddler milks to consumers in 2024. Five stores organized formulas by brand, leading to infant formulas and toddler milks occupying the same shelf space. Formulas were arranged by type in six stores, with toddler milks located on the bottom or top shelf. One store placed its single toddler milk with baking products.

Six different individual toddler milks were encountered in at least 25% of stores. Eight fluid ounces of toddler or whole milk contained roughly the same number of calories (140-180 calories) but differed in the macronutrient distribution of the calories (Table 1). Whole milk contained more protein (8g) and less total carbohydrates (12g) per 8 fl. oz. serving than all the toddler milks. Except for two toddler milks, total sugars were roughly the same compared to whole milk; however, whereas whole milk contains no added sugars, all of the toddler milks did include added sugars (2-8g/8 fl oz). Four of the toddler milks had corn syrup listed as the first or second ingredient.

FIGURE 1 Number of TV Ads Seen per Year for Infant and Toddler Products by Adults Age 18+



Notes: Data are licensed from The Nielsen Company.

TABLE 1: Nutritional content of toddler milks available in stores in 2024, compared to whole cow milk

COMPANY/BRAND	TYPE	SERVING SIZE	CALORIES (KCAL) PER 8 FL OZ	SATURATED FAT (G) PER 8 FL OZ	PROTEIN (G) PER 8 FL OZ	CARBOHYDRATES (G) PER 8 FL OZ	TOTAL SUGARS (G) PER 8 FL OZ	ADDED SUGARS (G) PER 8 FL OZ	SODIUM (MG) PER 8 FL OZ
Abbott/Similac	Go & Grow 360 Total Care	15g powder + 4fl oz water	140	3	4	14	14	8	60
Abbott/Similac	Go & Grow Sensitive	15g powder + 4fl oz water	140	3	4	16	6	6	50
Mead Johnson Nutrition/Enfamil	Enfagrow NeuroPro RTS ^a Toddler Milk	8 fl oz/240 mL	160	2	6	22	11	2	100
Mead Johnson Nutrition/Enfamil	Enfagrow Premium Toddler (large)	36g powder + 8 fl oz water	160	2.5	6	20	11	2	80
Mead Johnson Nutrition/Enfamil	Enfagrow Premium Toddler Gentlease	36g powder + 8 fl oz water	180	4	5	19	6	2	70
Mead Johnson Nutrition/Enfamil	Enfagrow Premium Toddler Vanilla	36g powder + 8 fl oz water	160	2.5	6	20	13	4	80
Whole Milk ¹⁴		8 fl oz	152	4.6	8	12	12	0	95

a: RTS: Ready-to-serve

Conclusion

This study found substantial reductions in adults' exposure to TV ads for toddler milks from 2013 to 2022. However, in a large U.S. metropolitan area, 12 out of 16 sampled stores still offered toddler milks to consumers in 2024, with the most frequently encountered products containing less protein, more carbohydrates and the presence of added sugars compared to whole milk. It is paramount to monitor marketing practices on other media platforms to prevent caregivers from being misinformed about toddler milks' health benefits. Recent evidence on trends in advertisement spending, sales and consumption of toddler milks is also needed.

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