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## NEWS ANALYSIS

# Infant formula poisonings expose weaknesses in UK checks and regulation, report finds

After dozens of babies in the UK fell ill after a tainted formula scare, campaigners are demanding tighter checks on products. **Emma Wilkinson** reports

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A recall of several brands of infant formula over contamination with a dangerous toxin exposed major weaknesses in surveillance, regulation, and public communication across UK government bodies, a report has concluded.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this year more than 60 batches of infant formula across several brands were pulled from shelves worldwide after cereulide, a bacterial toxin produced by *Bacillus cereus*, was detected.

In a report published on 4 June the First Steps Nutrition Trust charity outlined several concerns about how seriously the issue was taken by the UK government and connected agencies.<sup>2</sup>

In total, 61 reports of symptoms consistent with cereulide poisoning were identified among children who had consumed affected products in the UK and its crown dependencies.<sup>1</sup> But the report says the true number is likely to be higher given that contaminated products may have been on the UK market from May 2025, eight months before the Food Standards Agency (FSA) issued its first warning in January 2026.

Cereulide is a heat stable toxin that causes vomiting and other symptoms that may include stomach cramping and diarrhoea. Symptoms usually have a rapid onset, coming on 15 minutes to up to six hours after ingestion. Young children are among those at high risk of complications.

French officials had opened investigations into two deaths of babies linked to the contaminated formula, but no direct causal link has been proved.<sup>3</sup>

The First Steps Nutrition Trust noted that UK healthcare professionals and hospitals were advised to notify suspected cases of cereulide poisoning only in February 2026.<sup>4</sup> The charity's report said that cases of contamination may initially have gone undetected in the UK because of limitations in the country's surveillance and diagnostic capacity.

Furthermore, the gastrointestinal symptoms of cereulide toxicity are non-specific and overlap with common seasonal viral infections.

The charity's report came as the latest infant feeding survey for England,<sup>5</sup> also published on 4 June, continued to show high levels of reliance on infant formula. Almost half of new mothers who responded said they feed either just with formula (22%) or a combination of breast milk and formula (25%) after leaving hospital.

Against a backdrop of such widespread usage, First Steps Nutrition's report says women and babies are being badly let down by inadequate surveillance and regulation and by a lack of clear information on how to maintain safe and appropriate infant feeding practices.

The total volume of recalled formula has not been made public. But the affected manufacturers, including Danone, which produces Aptamil and Cow and Gate products, and Nestlé, which produces SMA and Little Steps, account for around 85% of the UK market.<sup>6</sup>

## Companies "left to mark own homework"

Experts said that while many parents became worried about the recalls not enough was done to warn the public about the risks and advise parents on what to do. The incident highlighted a "structural vulnerability" in the manufacture and distribution of infant formula, which is the only recommended alternative to breastmilk in the first year of life, the report said.

Simon Cameron, senior lecturer in microbiology and bioanalytical chemistry at Queen's University Belfast, who reviewed the report, said infants are in a "uniquely vulnerable position" when it comes to food safety and security. The contamination event endangered infants' health but also disrupted access to a product that most UK infants rely on as their primary food source in the first six months of life, the report said.

But this fact is not reflected in how the industry is regulated, with companies "left to mark their own homework," Cameron added.

European Union rules set out the microbiological standards that require companies to test for *Bacillus cereus*, but sampling frequency is determined by manufacturers, the report explained. It questioned whether current monitoring and enforcement arrangements were sufficient for products consumed by infants, "given the risks and their vulnerability."

Cameron agreed. "Incidents like this cereulide contamination, and many others in recent history, make a convincing argument for specific regulations and testing regimes to be introduced," he said. "These are needed to ensure families have access to a safe and secure option of using infant formula when they need to."

The contaminated ingredient was found to be arachidonic acid (ARA), a long chain polyunsaturated fatty acid supplied by Cabio Biotech and present in all UK infant formula, although there is no requirement for its inclusion, the report noted.

In response to the recall the UK government has said it has no current plans to introduce mandatory testing for cereulide or other toxins in formula milks.<sup>7</sup>

### Call for more surveillance and tougher regulation

Among the report's recommendations are for the UK Health Security Agency and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to put in place enhanced surveillance and expanded diagnostic capacity to help distinguish routine infant illness from cases related to contamination.

The report also called for the Food Standards Agency and the DHSC to strengthen oversight of infant formula safety through mandatory final product testing, defining testing schedules, regular inspections of manufacturing sites, independent audits of manufacturers own testing, and clear penalties for non-compliance.

The report is highly critical of the public health response to the contamination and recall.

Official information was provided through separate notices as batches were recalled and focused primarily on product safety and recall compliance rather than supporting families "to maintain safe, appropriate, and nutritionally adequate infant feeding practices," it said.

"No reassurance was provided to healthcare practitioners or parents that government could maintain a reliable supply of suitable infant formula for all infants who needed it," it added.

Amy Brown, professor of maternal and child health at Swansea University, who also contributed to the report, said the recalls have had a major effect on parents' wellbeing and trust. She said, "Parents have told us how they have felt anxious about the safety of formula, guilt about feeding their babies products that have since been recalled, and anger that a product designed for babies could be unsafe. Parents deserve better."

### "Poor" public communication

Speaking to *The BMJ*, Vicky Sibson, director at the First Steps Nutrition Trust, said the official response of the government and related agencies seemed to be disconnected from the reality for families, who were becoming increasingly worried as more products were affected. She said that parents had raised fears in online forums that their baby had been affected before the recall as they had been sick with "horrendous symptoms" but with no explanation.

First Steps Nutrition said it had also been contacted by health visitors looking for advice to provide to parents, which highlighted the lack of official guidance.

Infant formula is a unique product in that babies who are fed with it cannot just swap to another food if there's a problem, yet this is not reflected in regulation or oversight, Sibson added. "The public communication for affected families was poor and didn't meet their needs," she said.

"We need to ensure that the lessons learnt from the massive, toxin tainted formula contamination event of the start this year are translated into concrete actions to better protect infant health moving forward."

Priorities should be ensuring dependable, quality assured support for all mothers who want to breastfeed, independent testing of infant

formula and improved surveillance for preventable sickness linked to formula, and better information for parents on safe use of powdered formula, she added.

The report also mentioned recent price rises of infant formula that also put pressures on people who rely on the products.

An analysis by *Grocer* magazine found that 157 baby formula products rose in price by an average of 9.4% in the first two months of this year.<sup>8</sup>

"Underpinning all this is a need for our government to properly stand up to the formula industry and strengthen regulations against their pervasive, misleading marketing," Sibson added.

Responding to the report, Narriman Looch, head of food hygiene and foodborne disease control at the FSA, said, "The FSA is aware of the report and have discussed the findings with the First Steps Nutrition Trust.

"We will be working with other government departments to consider the recommendations that fall within FSA responsibilities."

A DHSC spokesperson said, "We are determined to ensure mothers get the consistent, high quality support they need both to support them to breastfeed and to make sure they have the best possible information where breastfeeding may not be an option.

"We are also taking action on commercial baby foods through voluntary guidelines reducing sugar and salt, improving labelling, and banning snack products from being marketed for babies under 12 months, as part of our mission to give every child the best start in life."

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