MEPs move to reduce permitted sugar content in baby foods

Draft EU rules that would allow baby foods to continue to contain up to three times more sugar than is recommended by the World Health Organisation were vetoed by the European Parliament on Wednesday, as they fail to protect infants and young children against obesity, say MEPs. Instead, they advocate reducing the EU sugar content limit to match the WHO recommendations.

"Today's vote is an important step in helping to ensure that EU rules on baby food are designed with their health as the utmost priority. The proposal by the EU Commission would have allowed baby foods to contain far higher levels of sugar than those recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The introduction of such high levels of sugar to foods – especially so early – would have contributed to the rising levels of childhood obesity and may affect the developing taste preferences of children. For infants and young children in particular, added sugar levels should be kept to a minimum" said MEP Keith Taylor (Greens/EFA, UK), who drafted the objection.

MEPs consider that the Commission's proposal is "contrary to all health advice from the WHO and from scientific committees in Member States who have recommended significant reductions in total sugar intake".

The WHO recommends limiting intake of free sugars to less than 10% of total energy intake. But under the European Commission's proposal, sugars could continue to provide up to 30% of the energy intake from baby foods (7.5g sugar/100kcal is equivalent to 30kcal from sugar in 100kcal energy).

Given that "Poor diet is now by far the biggest underlying cause of disease and death globally – bigger than tobacco, alcohol and physical inactivity combined" (...), “the allowed maximum sugar level should be substantially lowered in line with WHO recommendations" say MEPs.

MEPs also consider that, in line with the precautionary principle, emerging technologies such as GMOs and nanotechnologies, the long-term risks of which are not known, should be prohibited in these foods.

Labelling
MEPs say that the labelling and marketing of processed baby foods should make it clear that these products are not appropriate for infants of less than 6 months of age, and should not undermine the 6-month exclusive breastfeeding recommendation.

Next steps

The objection was approved by 393 votes to 305, with 12 abstentions. This vote sends the legislative act back to the drawing board.

Note to editors

The proposed act covers specifically processed cereal-based food and baby foods for infants and young children, and refers to Article 11 of Regulation (EU) No 609/2013 ("Parnuts-Regulation"), which empowers the European Commission to adopt delegated acts laying down specific compositional and information requirements for the foods under its scope.

Further information

Adopted text will be available here (click on 20.01.2016)
Press release on committee vote (14.01.2016)

Audiovisual material for media

Procedure file
Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

Political groups

News page of the EPP group
News page of the S&D group
News page of the ECR group
News page of the ALDE group
News page of the GUE/NGL group
Press release by the Greens/EFA group
News page of the EFDD group
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