

As if young mothers didn't have enough to be concerned about. A new study has shown that baby rice can be contaminated by arsenic, a known carcinogen. A third of commercial brands tested higher for arsenic than is allowed in public drinking water supplies. More study is needed to determine the health threat, but there are precautions that mothers can take now.

Weaning Your Baby From Breast Milk or Formula to . . . Arsenic?

A leading environmental chemist has recently published a study indicating that baby rice—a precooked, dried, and milled rice product that is a staple for weaning infants—may contain unsafe levels of arsenic. Dr. Andrew Meharg found high levels of arsenic in more than a third of commercial rice milk brands available in the United Kingdom. A child eating three servings a day of the rice with the highest levels would consume up to six times the maximum safe level of inorganic arsenic in drinking water under EU regulations.

Long-term exposure to arsenic in drinking water causes cancer of the skin, lungs, bladder, and kidney. Increased risk of lung and bladder cancer has been observed at drinking-water concentrations of less than 0.05 mg/L. That's why arsenic contamination of water supplies is closely regulated. Now some scientists and authorities are recommending arsenic testing for foods as well. Food products are not required to be tested for arsenic in the United States or the EU.

For now, not all authorities agree that these findings constitute a health hazard, but parents can take steps to ensure the safety of their young children until the issue is settled. Shopping for organically grown rice, which contains much less arsenic than rice grown by conventional methods, can help to reduce exposure. Oatmeal is another popular food for weaning infants. You can also vary your infant's diet by alternating rice or oatmeal with purees of fruits and vegetables. Starting your baby on fruits and vegetables provides her with a wide variety of important natural nutrients early in life.

Meharg, AA, et al. Inorganic arsenic levels in rice milk exceed EU and US drinking water standards. *Journal of Environmental Monitoring*. 10:428-31. 2008.

Williams, PN, et al. Market Basket Survey Shows Elevated Levels of As in South Central U.S. Processed Rice Compared to California: Consequences for Human Dietary Exposure. *Environmental Science & Technology*. 41:2178-2183. 2007.

World Health Organization. Arsenic in drinking water
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs210/en/index.html> (Accessed 05/05/08)