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Babies with high-risk of allergy: Can soy formula prevent it?



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Allergy and food intolerance are relatively common in children. They can be caused by various foods, including cow's milk products. Usually, though, the chance of a young child developing a food allergy is fairly small. The risk climbs though, if a close relative has an allergy. For example, 7 out of 10 babies develop allergies if both their parents have them. If just one of their parents or siblings has an allergy, then 3 out of 10 babies are at risk.

Out of the options for feeding babies, breastfeeding has the highest chance of helping a baby avoid developing an allergy. If a baby cannot be breastfed, there are several options. The most usual alternative is a formula based on cow's milk. Other options often used particularly to try to avoid allergies are soy-based formula or so-called hydrolysed formula. A hydrolysed formula is one where a protein in either cow's or soy-based milk has been broken down into parts. Proteins can be the cause of allergies. The hope is that by disrupting this protein, allergies will be avoided. Hydrolysed formulas are usually more expensive than ordinary formulas.

Researchers analysed the results of trials that tried to answer the question, whether soy formula might really be able to protect a baby from developing an allergy. They found three trials, which included more than 700 babies at higher risk of developing an allergy or food intolerance.

The result was that soy formula was not more protective against eczema or asthma than ordinary cow's milk formula. There were even some reports that soy formula led to the baby developing an allergy to soy. The researchers concluded from their analysis that soy formula has not been proven to prevent allergies.

None of the trials could answer the question of whether the choice of formula in the first six months has an impact on the risk of allergies in later years.

Glossary

allergy

An allergy is the body's overly sensitive reaction to a foreign substance. The body produces antibodies just as it would if the substance were a germ, although it is not dangerous to the body. The symptoms of the allergy partly depend on the substance causing it, the allergen. People with allergies often have symptoms like running nose, watery eyes, itching, rashes, stomach and bowel problems or asthma. Typical allergens are pollen, animal hair, proteins in certain food or house dust mite excrement.

asthma

Asthma (asthma bronchiale) is a permanent (chronic) disease with symptoms like coughing and breathlessness often occurring in acute attacks. In asthma, the airways are overly sensitive. The development of asthma is often associated with an overreaction to foreign substances or physical stimuli, frequently in connection with an allergy.

Sources

Osborn DA, Sinn J. Soy formula for prevention of allergy and food intolerance in infants. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2006, Issue 4. [Cochrane summary (URL: <http://www.mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD003741/frame.html>)]

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You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at [**www.informedhealthonline.org**](http://www.informedhealthonline.org)

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