



## FDA Falls Short in Protecting Infants and Young Children from Toxic Heavy Metals in Food

*Quotes can be attributed to Jane Houlihan, HBBF's Research Director*

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) just took a step forward—but missed a critical opportunity—to safeguard the health of infants and young children from the pervasive threat of lead contamination in food.

The FDA has issued its first-ever limits for lead in commercial baby food as part of its Closer to Zero initiative, aimed at minimizing exposure to toxic heavy metals in the diets of babies and young children. While this is an important milestone, the new lead limits are insufficient, resulting in a projected reduction of dietary lead exposure for children under age 2 by only 3.6%, according to an analysis commissioned by Healthy Babies Bright Futures (HBBF).

Just as concerning, the FDA's guidelines fail to address lead contamination in other significant sources, including infant formula, homemade baby food ingredients, and other store-bought foods consumed by babies—[sources that account for 75% of young children's dietary lead exposure](#).

No amount of lead is safe for children's developing brains, and food remains the primary source of lead exposure for most young children. Despite the importance of this initiative, the FDA's current action levels are too high to achieve meaningful reductions in lead exposure, leaving children vulnerable to lifelong harm.

According to an HBBF-commissioned analysis, children under age 2 lose over 11 million IQ points collectively due to heavy metal exposure in food. Lead exposure results in irreversible cognitive impairments, diminished economic potential, and lifelong challenges with learning and behavior. The stakes for stronger action couldn't be higher.

Parents rightly expect the government to take decisive action to eliminate toxic chemicals from the foods their children eat. To truly protect young children, the FDA must:

- Set stricter lead limits for commercial baby food to achieve significant exposure reductions.
- Expand its focus beyond baby food brands to include infant formula, homemade baby food ingredients, and other foods commonly consumed by babies.

[HBBF's 2019 report](#) revealed that 95% of baby foods tested contained heavy metals, including lead, arsenic, and cadmium. This alarming finding helped spur a 2021 congressional



investigation and FDA's launch of the Closer to Zero initiative. While the limits FDA is issuing under this initiative—known as Action Levels—are not legally binding, they establish benchmarks against which the FDA can deem a food adulterated.

The FDA must strengthen its lead limits and expand its scope to ensure meaningful protection for children's health. Anything less falls short of the urgent action parents and children deserve.

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