

# **Recommendations on plant-based drinks for children aged 1 year and over**

**Aim:** To ensure the appropriate choice of plant-based drinks and to highlight the health risks associated with consuming excess free sugars in the diets of young children.

**Intended audience:** all healthcare professionals who provide general dietary advice e.g., dietitians, doctors, dentists, nurses, health visitors

**Where plant-based drinks are used, we recommend that families are advised to choose unsweetened (without free sugars or non-sugar sweeteners) and fortified plant-based drinks to prevent these products from adding unnecessary free sugars to the diets of children aged 1 year and over and to provide a source of micronutrients.**

### **Main recommendations:**

1. Healthcare professionals should support continuation of breastfeeding, where possible, into the second year of life or beyond.<sup>1,2</sup>
2. For children aged 1-5 years old without cow's milk allergy and who consume animal products, pasteurised whole or semi-skimmed cow's milk is preferable to plant-based drinks when considering their nutritional profile.<sup>1</sup>
3. Where plant-based drinks are used, fortified and unsweetened (without free sugars or non-sugar sweeteners) drinks are an acceptable alternative<sup>1</sup>, such as soya, pea and oat drinks. Tree nut drinks are least preferred due to low nutritional content. Rice drinks are not recommended as a main milk alternative for children under 5 years due to concerns about the arsenic content.<sup>3</sup>
4. 'Growing up/toddler' drinks and follow-on formulas, whether they are plant-based drinks or cow's milk-based drinks or prescription low-allergy formulas (unless specifically requested by dietitian), are not recommended due to the free sugars content.<sup>1, 2, 4</sup>
5. Healthcare professionals should pro-actively ask what plant-based drinks are being offered to children and educate parents and carers on choosing the best option.
6. Healthcare professionals should ensure parents and carers have a regular teeth-cleaning routine for their child, which is essential for good dental health. This includes brushing teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice daily (including last thing at night), minimising the amount and frequency of consumption of sugar-containing foods and drinks, and avoiding these at bedtime<sup>5</sup>.
7. If there are wider concerns about overall diet quality, dietary restrictions and transition from prescribed products, nutritional status or growth, a dietetic review is required to ensure nutritional completeness.

## Suitable plant-based drinks:

Preferred	Least Preferred
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Unsweetened:</b> Look at the nutrition label - aim for the '<i>of which sugars</i>' stating 0g and check the ingredients list</li><li>• Fortified with calcium (<b>≥120 mg calcium per 100 ml</b>), iodine, riboflavin, vitamin B12 and vitamin D. <sup>1</sup></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Drinks labelled "toddler" or "growing-up"</b> <sup>1, 2, 4</sup></li><li>• Ingredients which contribute free sugars: e.g. <b>sugar, fructose, raw cane sugar, glucose, sucrose.</b><sup>1</sup></li><li>• Maltodextrin<sup>1, 4, 6</sup> and non-sugar sweeteners (e.g. stevia, erythritol, Acesulfame Potassium (Ace-K), sucralose)</li><li>• Organic products – these are <b>not</b> fortified</li></ul>

### Rationale:

The UK Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's (SACN) 2023 review of the dietary intakes and nutritional status of UK 1–5 year-olds showed excess consumption of free sugars in most children.<sup>2</sup> Free sugars intake is associated with overweight, obesity and tooth decay.<sup>6,7</sup> SACN recommended that the government consider strategies to reduce the consumption of free sugars and reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages among children of this age.<sup>2</sup> The above recommendations contribute to addressing this.

'Growing up' and 'toddler' drinks are extensively marketed for children over 12 months of age in the UK and many parents choose them. They are the top source of free sugars in the diets of 12-to-18 month olds<sup>4</sup> and contribute to 50% of free sugars intake in this age group.<sup>2</sup> SACN recommends that free sugars provide no more than 5% of total energy intake.<sup>2,8</sup> This is equivalent to ≤10 g per day for a 1-year-old, and ≤14 g per day for a 2 to 3 year old child. In some countries, maltodextrins are classified as added sugars within dietary guidance and regulatory frameworks.<sup>4,9</sup> Consumption of 350 ml of a typical 'growing-up' soya drink would provide a 1-year-old with 29 g of free sugars (including maltodextrins), while an oat-based drink would provide 21 g<sup>4</sup> - well in excess of recommended limits. It is therefore important that parents are proactively advised to avoid growing up or toddler drinks to reduce health risks<sup>7</sup> associated with excess free sugar intake.

Overall diet quality, including intake of free sugars, is influenced by dietary patterns, food choices and food preparation methods. It is also impacted by affordability and access to food, cultural and social factors, nutrition knowledge and beliefs, and health conditions. If there are wider concerns about these issues, dietetic review is recommended.

## REFERENCES:

Further information can be found in these reports:

1. SACN Assessing the health benefits and risks of consuming plant-based drinks  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68765a24cfc3756455bb6a61/plant-based-drinks-health-benefits-and-risks\\_main-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68765a24cfc3756455bb6a61/plant-based-drinks-health-benefits-and-risks_main-report.pdf)
2. SACN Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 report  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacn-report-feeding-young-children-aged-1-to-5-years/feeding-young-children-aged-1-to-5-years-summary-report>
3. Food Standard Agency [Arsenic in rice | Food Standards Agency](#) (2018)
4. First Steps Nutrition Trust report on growing up milks.  
[Drinks+marketed+as+toddler+and+growing+up+milks+and+drinks\\_FINAL1.pdf](#)
5. Delivering Better Oral Health Toolkit: [Delivering better oral health: an evidence-based toolkit for prevention - GOV.UK](#)
6. Rezende G and Hashizume LN. Maltodextrin and dental caries: a literature review. Revista Gaucha de Odontologica: volume 66, issue 3, pages 257 to 262. [SciELO Brazil - Maltodextrin and dental caries: a literature review](#)
7. Public Health England [Why 5%?](#)
8. SACN Carbohydrates and Health report. [Carbohydrates and Health](#)
9. Jones, A and Scapin, T, (2020, updated 2023) Supporting Evidence-Informed Policy Work on Added Sugar: A Report Commissioned for VicHealth. Sydney: George Institute for Global Health, Version 3, 2023).
10. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-better-oral-health-an-evidence-based-toolkit-for-prevention/chapter-10-healthier-eating>
11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-oral-health-applying-all-our-health/child-oral-health-applying-all-our-health>

This document has also been reviewed and is endorsed by the British Dental Association and the Food Allergy Specialist Group of the British Dietetic Association.

## APPENDIX

### Examples of unsweetened and fortified plant-based drinks:

- Soya-based drinks (kcal and protein/100ml; [preferred]): M&S Unsweetened Soya Drink (30kcal, 2.8g), Sainsbury's Unsweetened Soya (26kcal, 2.2g), Tesco Soya Drink Unsweetened (33kcal and 3.5g), The Grower's Harvest Soya Drink Unsweetened (28kcal, 3g), Waitrose Essential Soya Unsweetened Milk Alternative (35kcal, 3.4g), Alpro No Sugars Soya (33kcal, 3.3g protein, no iodine)\*, Aldi Actileaf Soya No Sugars (31kcal, 3.4g), Morrisons Long Life Unsweetened Soya Drink (35kcal, 3.4g, no iodine)
- Pea-based drinks (kcal and protein/100ml): Mighty Pea Unsweetened Pea M.LK (25kcal, 2g)\*, Sproud Unsweetened Pea protein milk alternative (20kcal, 1.5g)\*
- Oat-based drinks (kcal and protein/100ml): Oatly No Sugars Oat Drink (44kcal, 1g)\*, Alpro No Sugars Oat (44kcal, 0.7g)\*
- Almond-based drinks (kcal and protein/100ml; [least preferred]): Tesco Unsweetened Almond Drink (15kcal, 0.3g), Alpro No Sugars Almond (14kcal, 0.4g protein, no iodine), M&S Plant Kitchen Almond Unsweetened (11kcal, <0.1g), ASDA Plant Based Almond Unsweetened (18kcal, 0.8g protein)

*\*Uses calcium carbonate which is well absorbed and may be more bioavailable than tricalcium phosphate.*

*This list is not exhaustive, and information was correct at time of publication. Please note many of the above drinks are not fortified with vitamin A and/or vitamin D.*