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Infant Formulas

Infant formula tastes like the sweet milk left in the bottom of the cereal bowl after you finished your Frosted Flakes. However, don't let that sweetness fool you; most formulas have the same number of calories as cow's milk (20 calories per ounce). Breast milk, by the way, also has the same number of calories and is just as sweet as formula. One word of advice: Whether you start with Enfamil, Similac, Carnation, Isomil, Prosobee or any of the numerous formulas on the market, don't buy too much. You may have to change formulas, either because the baby develops an intolerance to the formula, or because some illness necessitates a temporary switch. In either case, you can get stuck with a lot of expensive formula if you buy more than a few cases to start.

There are several different types of infant formula:

- **Cow's milk formulas:** Since the 1920's most infant formulas have been made from cow's milk. Such formulas as Similac and Enfamil are a first choice for most doctors because they have stood the test of time and they are close to breast milk in composition, with very similar percentages of fats, carbs and protein. The carbohydrate used, as in breast milk, is lactose (milk sugar), the fat is vegetable oil and the protein source is milk protein (casein and whey).

- **Special cow's milk formulas:** With the goal of making cow's milk formula more like breast milk, formula makers have come up with specialized formulas that are a bit closer in composition to mother's own milk. For example, most formulas are now supplemented with arachidonic acid (ARA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), two fatty acids which are believed, in a small way, to contribute to the health and neurologic development of babies.

- **Soy formulas** such as Prosobee, Nursoy and Isomil, substitute soy protein for cow's milk protein. Although soy protein is almost as allergenic as cow's milk protein, it's a good choice for babies who are cow's milk intolerant, since it's relatively inexpensive. Soy formulas are also lactose-free.

- **Lactose-free cow's milk-based formulas** treat feeding difficulties caused by lactose intolerance, rarely a permanent condition for babies, but occurring, on occasion, for a short time after severe stomach viruses. These formulas are similar to the usual cow's milk formulas, such as Enfamil and Similac, but they substitute corn syrup for lactose.

- **Hydrolysate formulas** break down (hydrolyze) formula protein into smaller, easier-to-digest and less allergenic proteins. Such formulas as Alimentum, Nutramigen and Neocate are good choices for babies with definite cow's milk intolerance. Unfortunately, they're expensive.

- **Premature formulas** such as Neosure, have more calories, more protein and more calcium and phosphorus than regular formulas, all of which help premies “catch-up” in size more quickly.

Formula intolerance: Don't play formula roulette

Babies, especially very young ones, are often a bit fussy. Because babies spend much of their time feeding, it is not surprising that parents believe that formula intolerance is a source of the fussiness. The baby who has the typical fussy period or “witching hours” every night from 7 to 10, but who is happy and peppy all day, probably does not have a formula intolerance. The infant who gulps down a six ounce bottle in no time flat, who is growing beautifully, but who occasionally spits up or has a few loose stools, similarly needs no change in formula. On the other hand, a baby who is gaining poorly and who has frequent loose, bloody stools or vomits every feeding may be, after a visit to the pediatrician, a good candidate for a formula change.

All of the above-mentioned special formulas exist because a small percentage of babies have cow's milk formula intolerance. Most babies will do just fine on the formulas they start. They gain weight well, don't spit up too much, make soft bowel movements a few times a day and aren't terribly gassy. That's about all a baby can ask of a formula. It's not too exciting, but it's all a baby needs. Remember, however, that we said not to buy too much formula in case you have to change. Obviously there must be some times when things don't work out so smoothly, and these are times when it is necessary to change from one type of formula to another.