



Babies should be getting whole grains, doctors say

Pediatricians: Replacing white rice helps combat childhood obesity

By Liz Szabo • Gannett • December 7, 2010

Harvard School of Public Health researchers find that replacing one-third of a serving of white rice with whole grains (brown rice, bulgur, oatmeal) each day may reduce diabetes risk by 36 percent.

In their study, people who ate five or more servings of white rice a week had 17 percent higher risk of type 2 diabetes than those who ate less than one a month.

Pediatrician Alan Greene worries that babies are getting hooked on highly processed white rice and flour, which could set them up for a lifetime of bad dietary habits. Almost every childcare book offers the same advice about a baby's first meal.

When infants are ready for solid food, experts say, start them first on rice cereal, available in a box, mixed with breast milk or formula. Babies have launched their eating careers this way for 60 years, says Greene, a pediatrician at Stanford University's Lucile Packard Children Hospital.

In the 1950s, Greene says, baby food companies trumpeted the benefits of white rice cereal, telling mothers that it was easier for babies to digest than anything they could make at home. "The ads said, 'You can't feed children as well as we can,'" said Greene, author of *Feeding Baby Green*.

But David Ludwig, director of the Optimal Weight for Life program at Children's Hospital Boston, said, "There's no scientific basis for this recommendation. That's a myth."

Concerned about increasing childhood obesity and growing rates of diabetes, some pediatricians want to change how babies eat.

Greene is encouraging parents to abandon white rice cereal in favor of more nutritious brown rice cereals or even a homemade brown rice mash or vegetable purée.

"They won't mind," said Greene, who recently launched a *WhiteOut* campaign. "They'll thank you

for it."

He is concerned that babies are getting hooked on the taste of highly processed white rice and flour, which could set them up for a lifetime of bad habits — such as a weakness for cakes and cookies.

White rice — after processing strips away fiber, vitamins and other nutrients — is a "nutritional disaster," Ludwig said. It's "as processed as anything in the food supply (and) the nutritional equivalent of table sugar."

White rice and flour turn to sugar in the body "almost instantly," raising blood sugar and insulin levels "while providing virtually no other nutrients," Ludwig said.

The USA Rice Federation, which represents the rice industry, counters that white rice has no fat, cholesterol, sodium or gluten, a protein in wheat to which some people are allergic, said spokeswoman Stacy Fitzgerald-Redd. Even fussy babies can tolerate white rice without an upset stomach.

It's "as nutritionally sound as any other carbohydrate," she said.

Babies certainly eat a lot of it.

It's "the No. 1 source of calories for kids in the first year of life, other than breast milk or formula," Greene said, noting that, "by 18 months, most children get no whole grains each day."

Greene said parents don't have to abandon instant

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rice cereal, which offers the advantage of added iron, an important nutrient for babies, especially those who are breast-fed. Most cereal manufacturers already offer a brown rice alternative.

While offering whole grains seems like a smart idea, nutrition expert Walter Willett says white rice is far from the only culprit in the obesity epidemic. Most kids also drink too many sugary beverages, such as fruit juice, punch and soda, said Willett, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and co-author of the June diabetes study.

"I don't want people to feel guilty," Greene said. "I have four kids and I figured this out just recently. But it's time to change."



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