

US baby formula shortage drags on with no end in sight

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Six months after Abbott Labs recalled product and the FDA shut down its infant formula factory in Sturgis, Michigan due to unsanitary conditions, the shortage of baby food in the US continues. As with the coronavirus pandemic, the public is being told that they will have to learn to live with the shortage.

According to a report by the market research firm IRI, 20 percent of all types of baby formula products were not to be found on store shelves nationwide during the week of July 18-24. The IRI data show that 30 percent of powdered formula products were out of stock during the same period.

Parents of newborns, infants and children with special dietary needs are still facing stark choices as they go from store to store looking for the specific product that they need. In many cases, purchasing substitute products can be unsafe or even fatal. In some states, such as Colorado and Kansas for example, stocks on store shelves dropped below 60 percent in July.

The lack of any criticism of the government or manufacturers from the corporate news media, as well as the complete silence of the Biden administration on the crisis, demonstrates that the well-being of infants and children across the US is not on the priority list for the American ruling elite. According to the news site *Axios*, the baby formula shortage “is here to stay.”

A web site published by the White House called, “Addressing the Infant Formula Crisis” has not been updated since late June. Aside from announcing that it has flown in a completely inadequate quantity of baby formula from overseas, the Biden White House has had nothing to say about the fact that the wealthiest capitalist country in the world cannot feed its children.

FDA commissioner Robert Califf told NPR on July 30 that baby formula production will have to remain at high levels for another six to eight weeks to keep up

with current demand. This is the same thing he said two months ago. A major factor in the continuing shortage is the fact that the Abbott Labs’ Sturgis facility, after reopening in early June, was shut down again due to flooding from heavy rainstorms in the area.

The indifference to the crisis facing millions of people was articulated plainly by Biden’s Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who said on May 15, “The government does not make baby formula, nor should it. Companies make formula.”

“Let’s be very clear,” Buttigieg said, “this is a capitalist country.”

The baby formula supply crisis began during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when families began clearing shelves and stocking up on products in anticipation of having to isolate at home for an extended period. This was followed by an increase in breastfeeding—and a dramatic fall in demand for formula—as women workers were either laid off or began working from home during the pandemic.

The response of the four monopoly baby food manufacturers—Abbott Nutrition, Mead Johnson Nutrition, Nestle USA and Perrigo Company—to the fall in demand was to dramatically cut back production. Then, when employees returned to work following the lifting of coronavirus restrictions, breastfeeding dropped and demand for baby formula surged, causing a shortage of supply.

The store shelf shortage was already well underway when reports emerged in September 2021 that infants were getting sick after they consumed products made by Abbott Labs. When four babies were hospitalized and two of them died from bacterial infections connected with a potentially deadly strain of *Cronobacter*, the FDA—after doing nothing for months—conducted an inspection of the Sturgis facility

at the end of January 2022.

The conditions at the Abbott Labs factory were described by FDA Commissioner Califf at a congressional hearing as “shocking,” and he said the government agency had “no confidence in the quality program at the facility.” Remarkably, Abbott Labs was permitted to announce a “voluntary recall” of products and “agreed” to shut down the Sturgis, Michigan factory.

The close relationship between the FDA and Abbott Labs was exposed when it was revealed that the agency had a whistleblower report on unsanitary practices by the company for eight months and did nothing to act on it.

The impact on families has been devastating. So far, the FDA has admitted that a total of ten infants have died from bacterial infections after consuming Abbott Labs products such as Similac. Even though the FDA found *Cronobacter sakazakii*—which is known to cause meningitis in infants—at the Sturgis facility due to standing water, roof leaks and mold and moisture in the equipment used to manufacture powdered formula, the company has been allowed to deny that its products had any connection to the infections and deaths of babies.

Despite the recall, potentially contaminated product has remained on the marketplace. As Amy Dolan, a mother of three in New Jersey, told CNBC in June, “You get this sick feeling in the pit of your stomach because we had a can that had been recalled and it was empty, we had just finished it. And, you know, I’m sitting there thinking, oh my God, what have I given my child?”

On Monday, ABC News published a lengthy review of FDA documents that showed the three other manufacturers had also tested positive for *Cronobacter* contamination in recent years. Among the details revealed by ABC News were an FDA inspection of Mead Johnson’s factory in Evansville, Indiana showed that the company itself had found *Cronobacter* “in one of the plant’s room, and that the area was subsequently sanitized.”

ABC News reported that seven investigators visited Mead Johnson’s facility in Zeeland, Michigan after the company alerted the FDA that two finished batches of Enfamil formula which tested positive for *Cronobacter* had already been exported out of the country.

The FDA inspection found the bacteria “in critical

and high hygiene areas of the processing environment in 26 locations” between January and August 2017. The FDA investigators said they found *Cronobacter* in areas that risked “potential contamination” of “food contact surfaces.” The FDA said that the factory had “multiple wall leaks” as well as “equipment condensation” in areas where the bacteria was found.

In August 2021, the FDA made a routine visit to Nestlé Nutrition’s Gateway facility in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where Gerber products are manufactured. The FDA investigators found “dirty scoops used during the previous production day” lying on a stainless-steel table in one of the raw material rooms, and “debris” on the floor. *Cronobacter* was found in the powdered formula being made there.

Similar findings were made at the PBM Nutritionals/Perrigo facility in Milton, Vermont in August 2019. The ABC News report says, “Documents provided by the company to the FDA noted a recent roof leak had overwhelmed the drainage system, and that, upon inspection, environmental sample swabs tested positive for *Cronobacter* before additional cleaning.”



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