

Goodbye, allergies?

Special infant formula products claim to protect infants from allergies. However, their benefit has not been proven.

The most natural and healthiest nutrition for infants is breastfeeding. There is a wide range of industrially produced infant formula products for infants who are not or not fully breastfed. These include products labelled as "HA". They contain partially hydrolysed protein – in other words, protein that has been broken down into smaller components through a special processing technology. Some manufacturers claim that such products are particularly well tolerated and suitable for allergy prevention in infants at high risk of allergies. However, there has been a controversial debate in recent years as to whether these products really offer such benefits. The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) has investigated this issue.

It is known that infants with a genetic predisposition – when the parents or direct siblings are affected by an allergy – have an increased risk of allergic diseases. It is thus understandable that parents want their children to be protected from this.

Until recently, it was recommended that infants at increased risk of allergies who are not or not fully breastfed, should be fed a partially hydrolysed infant formula until complementary feeding is started. This recommendation was based on the assumption that the risk of allergies is reduced if only small amounts of intact cow's milk protein, i. e. protein that has not been broken down, are consumed in the first few months of life.

DISPUTED STUDY

In Germany, this recommendation was mainly based on the "GINI Study" (The German Infant Nutritional

Intervention Study). This study investigated the efficacy of different hydrolysed infant formulas in preventing allergies in infants born between 1995 and 1998. The study reported for one of the products a protective effect on the risk of atopic dermatitis. However, in the view of the BfR, methodological shortcomings of the study limit the reliability of the results. Regardless of this, the products studied are no longer available in their original composition.

The benefits of such infant formulas has therefore been subject of an increasing debate. The assessment is complicated by differences in study design and product characteristics, for example, due to variation in protein hydrolysates obtained from different manufacturing processes. It is acknowledged that infant formula products currently available on the market are suitable for infants from a nutritional point of view; however, their effectiveness in preventing allergies is questionable. —

INFANT FORMULA CONSUMPTION IN GERMANY (KIESEL STUDY 2014–2017)

73 %
of children aged between 0.5 and 5 years have received infant formula at some point

24 %
of children aged between 0.5 and 5 years have been given HA infant formula