



## SOUTHWEST PUBLIC HEALTH DISTRICT

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### Watering down baby formula to stretch dollars poses serious danger to infants

Financially strapped parents who add extra water to baby formula to hold down expenses put their infants at risk of malnutrition and water intoxication, warns Southwest Health District Public Health Director Jacqueline Grant.

“This is a concern because formula is expensive, economic times are tough and likely to get tougher and most people don’t realize that adding extra water to baby formula can have severe consequences, especially in infants less than a year old,” Grant said. “Water intoxication can cause low blood sodium levels, irritability, coma, seizures, organ damage, brain damage and even death.”

Earlier this month, news agencies in Florida reported that a 5-month-old baby was hospitalized and nearly died when his mother added water to his formula, said Grant. “She was trying to stretch her supply to save money and did not realize that the additional water would make her baby sick.”

The woman was receiving nutritional assistance from Public Health through the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, Grant said. WIC offers supplements, support and services to women who are pregnant; new mothers up to six months after giving birth who are not breastfeeding; women up to 12 months after giving birth who are breastfeeding; and infants and children up to 5 years of age who are at nutritional risk.

The United States Department of Agriculture administers the WIC program and sets the amount of formula participating households may receive per day.

WIC generally provides approximately 70 percent of babies’ nutritional requirements. Unfortunately, struggling families may rely solely on it, particularly if they are hard-hit by a downturn in the economy, Grant said.

“It is not hard to imagine a scenario like the one in Florida happening somewhere else – including here in Southwest Georgia – especially in light of the unfolding financial crisis,” she said. “Like elsewhere in the country, our health district is seeing an increase in the number of WIC participants. At the same time, the cost of formula is going up.”

Susan Miller, who oversees Southwest Health District’s Nutrition Services, which includes WIC, said program enrollment in the district’s 14 counties has jumped from 14,100 last year to 14,694 this year. “We have seen an increase of almost 600 participants in one year,” she said.

A recent USDA report showed WIC participation in Georgia leaped by more than 10 percent from 2007 to 2008.

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And other than WIC, families in need have few resources for baby formula. The cost of formula means that few food banks or charities keep much in stock since they can get far more canned goods and staples than formula for the same amount of money.

“According to an average price from three major grocery chains, a 13-ounce can of liquid concentrate formula is \$4.34,” Miller said. “Powdered formula costs \$13.57 per can. Under the USDA regulations, the maximum amount WIC can provide is 806 fluid ounces of formula. That is about 26.9 ounces per day.”

“With growing fears about plant shut-downs, loan defaults and layoffs, we anticipate more people will be cutting corners to make ends meet,” Grant said. “But people need to be aware that savings from watering down infant formula has a high cost in their babies’ health and wellbeing. We don’t want what happened in Florida happening here.”

For more information about WIC, or instructions on preparing formula and feeding babies safely, contact your local county health department or call the Southwest District Health Office of Nutrition Services at 229-430-4111.

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