



The European Consumers' Organisation

COMMUNIQUE DE PRESSE  
PRESS RELEASE

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## MEPs to lead the charge against unfounded baby food claim?

*"DHA intake contributes to the normal visual development of infants up to 12 months of age"*

This is the unsubstantiated claim EU consumers could read on follow-on milk formula and baby foods unless MEPs oppose it tomorrow.

While the European Commission intends to authorize the use of such a claim for products enriched with synthesised DHA<sup>1</sup>, a fatty acid which allegedly improves babies' eyesight, BEUC calls on MEPs to veto<sup>2</sup> tomorrow in plenary the use of this unsubstantiated and misleading claim.

### Insufficient scientific support

Scientists disagree on the causal relationship between products enriched with synthesised DHA and better eyesight of babies. EFSA, the European Food Safety Authority, itself concluded<sup>3</sup> there is no evidence to claim effect on vision for follow-on formulas and baby foods. In addition, other scientists have expressed safety concerns<sup>4</sup>.

With the scientific community in disagreement over the link between synthetic DHA and visual development and the questions over health implications, BEUC believes such a claim should not be permitted and further independent research should be conducted to address these knowledge gaps rather than promoting its purported benefits on infants, a particularly vulnerable group in our society.

### Claims as mere marketing tool

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, the European Consumers' Organisation declared:

"Consumers trust marketing claims relating to health and nutrition, it is therefore crucial parents are not misled when trying to make the best choices for their children."

"EU legislation<sup>5</sup> only allows for claims substantiated by 'generally accepted scientific evidence' and yet it does not seem to be the case here. We are therefore all the more concerned since baby food is involved. Infants' health should not be subject to industries' marketing strategies."

ENDS

For more details, please find attached the letter sent by BEUC to members of the ENVI committee ahead of vote

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<sup>1</sup> Docosahexaenoic acid

<sup>2</sup> MEPs adopted a [draft resolution](#) with 30/28 votes in ENVI committee on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2011

<sup>3</sup> Letter from EFSA to the European Commission on 03/09/2009: *"The evidence, however, does not establish that starting DHA supplementation at 4-6 months in infants who had received a control (DHA-free) formula in the first months of life would have an effect on the visual development of those children."*

<sup>4</sup> Report in the British Medical Journal by Kathy Kennedy et al. in June 2010

<sup>5</sup> Regulation 1924/2006 on nutrition and health claims made on foods

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 [EC register for interest representatives: identification number 9505781573-45](#) 

# PLENARY VOTE ON THE RESOLUTION OBJECTING TO THE AUTHORISATION OF THE DHA HEALTH CLAIM

Letter sent to all Members of the European Parliament  
(Ref.: L2011\_107/MGO/RVE/cm - 31 March 2011)

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**Ref.:** X/043/2011 - 05/04/11

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 EC register for interest representatives: identification number 9505781573-45 

Dear Member of the European Parliament,

**Re: Plenary vote on the Resolution objecting to the authorisation of the DHA health claim.**

We are writing to you ahead of next Wednesday's plenary vote on the Resolution objecting to the authorisation of the health claim 'DHA has a structural and functional role in the retina and DHA intake contributes to the visual development of infants up to 12 months of age' for use on follow-on formulas and baby foods.

**BEUC fully supports this resolution and strongly urges you to vote for it.**

Claims have been and continue to be used as a major marketing tool by the food industry in order to entice consumers into buying products. Research carried out on behalf of BEUC<sup>1</sup> shows that consumers tend to read and trust marketing claims relating to health and nutrition with a majority believing that, if a product has a claim it is 'better' or 'rather better' for them.

It is vital that parents have access to accurate information when choosing which products to buy for their children. With the ongoing debate in the scientific community over the link between synthesized DHA and visual development in babies, we believe that, before making claims as to the proposed benefits of using such follow-on formulas, the gaps in knowledge should be addressed and all possible effects of such supplementation should be thoroughly examined.

Under the claims Regulation, health claims must be based on '*generally accepted scientific evidence*'. For the DHA claim in question, we are concerned by the lack of consistent peer-reviewed independent evidence of a causal relationship between formulas fortified with long-chain fatty acids and better eyesight in babies. Indeed the 2007 Systematic Review of the Cochrane Library concluded that feeding term infants with milk formula enriched with long chain poly unsaturated fatty acids "*had no proven benefit regarding vision, cognition or physical growth*" and EFSA itself has stated that there is no evidence to support the claim for follow-on formulas or baby foods. This is very worrying as it is exactly these types of products which this claim would be used on if it were to be permitted.

EFSA has stated that there is a lack of research examining the effects of feeding babies infant formula not supplemented with DHA from birth and then switching to the supplemented formula from 6 months. Again, as the proposed claim would only be permitted on follow-on formula, it is clear that there is a gap in the research to examine the effects on the visual development of such children and this needs to be addressed.

There have also been indications of safety concerns within the scientific community regarding the effects of synthesized DHA. With the scientists themselves in disagreement over this issue, the focus should be on conducting further independent research into the effects of supplementing formula with synthesized DHA to address these knowledge gaps rather than promoting its purported benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted on behalf of BEUC by SPAD on European consumers' perception of foodstuff labelling in 2005 – Can be provided on request to [food@beuc.eu](mailto:food@beuc.eu)

Infants are a particularly vulnerable group of the population that all of us need to consider particularly carefully. Given the ongoing debate within the scientific community over the link between synthesized DHA and visual development we do not believe that such a claim should be permitted on follow on formula. In fact, if an ingredient is proven to provide a benefit without an unacceptable risk by an independent systematic review of all the evidence we believe it should be an essential ingredient in all formulas and not used as a promotion tool for a select few.

We hope that you will take these issues into consideration when voting.

Yours sincerely,

Monique Goyens  
Director General

Ruth Veale  
Head of the Food, Health, Environment  
and Safety Department