

Soy Formula and Menstrual Pain: A Look at the Evidence

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Date : January 3, 2019

Despite being widely commercially available for decades and having been used by as many as 20 million Americans during infancy, the advantages and disadvantages of soy infant formula (SIF) have been debated for 25 years. This debate exists despite the U.S. National Toxicology Program twice concluding there is little evidence to suggest SIF isn't safe, a conclusion consistent with the position of the American Academy of Pediatrics.¹

In 2001, a landmark study by Strom et al.² concluded that “exposure to soy formula does not appear to lead to different general health or reproductive outcomes than exposure to cow milk formula.” This retrospective study examined a wide variety of health outcomes among 248 adults who were fed SIF and 563 adults who were fed cow milk formula during infancy.

You would think this study would have helped to alleviate concerns, but despite this conclusion, this study has been cited as support by those raising alarm about the safety of SIF. This may seem surprising, but Strom et al.² did recommend that the few statistically significant findings from their research should be explored in future studies. One of the significant findings was that women who had been fed SIF as infants reported slightly longer duration of menstrual bleeding and greater discomfort with menstruation. As discussed below, 17 years later, this finding was investigated by Upson et al.³ in a paper published in “Human Reproduction.”

The research by Strom et al.² is considered a landmark study for at least two reasons. One, it is a retrospective study that provides insight into the possible health effects of soyfoods as long as 34 years after consumption. Critics of SIF often suggest that potential harm may not be immediately obvious. To this way of thinking, the many relatively short-term feeding studies (