

FDA chief says baby formula supply is expected to remain short through late July; meanwhile, shortage gets worse in Kentucky

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Photo from The Associated Press

By Melissa Patrick

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The baby formula shortage continues to worsen in Kentucky, with the state's out-of-stock rate increasing by 20 percentage points since May 8, according to the retail data firm **Datasembly**.

Datasembly reports that in the week starting May 15, the latest data available, Kentucky's out-of-stock rate for baby formula increased to 75%, up from 55% the prior week. That placed Kentucky 26th among the states, with out-of-stock rates ranging from a high of nearly 89% in Utah to a low of 45% in Illinois. The nationwide out-of-stock rate is 70%.

Gov. Andy Beshear said at his May 26 news conference that he could not confirm the data, but said, "Certainly there is a nationwide shortage, which is real concerning."

Kelly Potts, a spokeswoman for Datasembly, said in an e-mail that their data comes from more than 230 retailers with over 130,000 stores across the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and the out-of-stock (OOS) index only includes U.S. stores.

"Datasembly's proprietary data collection platform collects OOS information for each designated product based on OOS indicators . . . We collect the in-stock and out-of-stock information at the product level for each of the stores," Potts said. "For example, if a retailer offers 10 unique formula products on the shelf and the indicators point to 5 of the 10 products being out of stock, this would generate a 50% out-of-stock status."

Beshear encouraged Kentuckians who are part of the **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children**, or WIC, to reach out to their WIC provider, which is usually the local health department, if they are struggling to get enough formula. He said those who are not part of the WIC program should reach out to their pediatrician.

WIC is available to Kentucky residents who are pregnant, breastfeeding or have a child 5 or younger and have household income of no more than 185% of the **federal poverty level**, with rules governing what counts as income. Anyone who receives Medicaid or is part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) automatically meets the income requirements for WIC. **Click here** for a WIC PreScreening Tool to see if you are eligible for WIC benefits.

According to the state **Department for Public Health**, Kentucky has about 19,500 infants on WIC who are fully formula-fed in any given month.

The health department said it connects WIC participants with about 350,000 containers of formula per month, accounting for about \$2.2 million in WIC benefits per month, just over a third of the total benefits.

The department said redemption of formula since **the February recall** by major manufacturer **Abbott Laboratories** has declined by about one-third, from an average utilization rate of about 82% six months before the recall to about 69% in the first quarter of the year.

The agency said it took several actions in response to the recall.

"The Kentucky WIC Program quickly requested and began to execute all **waivers** available to the states as soon as the **U.S. Department of Agriculture** provided for them," Susan Dunlap, spokeswoman for the department, said in an e-mail. "However, that has only been a small part of their response."

Louisville's **WFPL reports** that Kentucky made its first policy change to expand the types of formula covered by WIC in February, and has since updated this policy several times to add more types of formula to the list. **Click here** to see the list of approved formulas available to WIC participants.

Dunlap said the state has worked to keep local health departments updated as the situation has unfolded; is pushing important updates to WIC families via the WIC Shopper smartphone app; and are in "constant contact" with Abbott about reports of regional supply deficiencies.

In a story about the baby formula shortage that opened with the state's May 8 out-of-stock rate, Norge Garcia **told** the Louisville **Courier Journal** about his struggles to find the specific formula for 4-month-old, who was born premature and can only have one type of formula, Nutramigen, because of his weight. "I walked the day before yesterday more than six hours looking for milk, and of the 10 cans that WIC gives us . . . we only got one," Garcia told the newspaper in Spanish.

"I went to seven **Walmarts** — all the Walmarts that are here in Louisville, I went to all of them," he said. "I went to **Target** and none of them have any. There is only milk for babies 9 months and older."

Abbott and the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** recently agreed how to reopen the Michigan plant where formula is made, but it will take several weeks to affect supplies. Beshear said Thursday, "We believe that we're going to see a significant boost in the coming weeks, but we've got to get to that point."

The baby formula shortage in the U.S. will likely not be resolved until late July, FDA Administrator Robert Califf said Thursday at a Senate Health Committee hearing, **The Hill reports**.

"My expectation is that within two months we should be beyond normal, and with a plethora," Califf said. "It's going to be gradual improvement up to probably somewhere around two months until the shelves are replete again."