

Parents Worried Over Bug-Tainted Baby Formula

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Worried parents have bombarded the maker of Similac with phone calls and peppered Facebook and Twitter pages over fears about insects in the top-selling baby formula after millions of cans were recalled.

But the company said Thursday it's unlikely any of the formula already sold is tainted, and doctors offered more reassurance: Even if babies drink bug-tainted formula, the chance for serious harm is slim.

"There's no reason for parents to panic," said Dr. Joseph Gigante, an associate professor of pediatrics at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital in Nashville, Tenn. Symptoms might include a mild upset stomach, but he says that should last only a few days.

Still, parents like Stephanie Roseman are upset. Her 3-month-old son seemed like he had a stomach ache this week after drinking formula from one of Abbott's recalled lots. So Roseman's switching to a rival formula.

"He was definitely fussy, and he's not a fussy kid at all," said Roseman, 33. "I wish they were a little more careful screening what's going into the formula."

North Chicago, Illinois-based Abbott voluntarily recalled 5 million cans and plastic containers of Similac powdered formula only as a precaution after small common beetles were found at its Sturgis, Michigan, manufacturing plant, said company spokeswoman Kelly Morrison.

The bugs are a common warehouse beetle that were found near a production line late last week. Abbott immediately stopped production and then tested containers of formula from that line. Morrison said "99.8 percent of product was not contaminated."

"Chances are really, really remote" that beetle parts made it into formula that was sold to consumers, but the products were recalled just in case they might contain beetle parts or larvae, Morrison told The Associated Press.

Similac is the top-selling infant formula in the United States. Abbott's nutritional products, including adult brands like Ensure, had worldwide sales of \$5.3 billion last year.

Morrison said Abbott expects to lose \$100 million in connection with the recall.

Recalled products include certain lots of Similac Advance LCP with iron powder, Go and Grow milk powder and Isomil Advance Powder. Morrison stressed that liquid formula is not involved.

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Affected products were sent throughout the United States, and to Bermuda, Guam, Puerto Rico and 17 other countries in the Caribbean region including Jamaica and Haiti.

The company set up a website, www.similac.com/recall where consumers can check to see if they have products with the affected lot numbers. Abbott said those products should be returned to the company for a full refund.

"Delivering anything less than the highest quality formula ... is unacceptable to us," Morrison said. "We will do whatever is necessary to maintain the trust of parents."

That includes setting up new online and telephone access for parents to find out which lots were recalled. Phone lines jammed Thursday and scores of parents who use Similac products complained on a Similac Facebook page about not being able to reach the company or its website.

"There's just a super high volume of consumers trying to get on the website at same time," Morrison said.

Sheri Weber was among frustrated mothers who had trouble logging on to the initial website. Her 8-month-old son drank two cans of formula from one of the affected lots before she found out about the recall Wednesday night.

"He had an upset tummy last week and I don't know if it was gas or this issue," said Weber, 22. "If it can cause issues with your baby, that's an amazing matter," she said. "That can keep a mother up all night."

Weber said she's switching to Similac liquid formula. But after a rash of recent recalls, from eggs to baby Tylenol she used to give her son, she said she's starting to think no products are safe.

Many hospitals use powdered Similac in newborn nurseries for mothers who don't breast-feed, including Harvard's Brigham and Women's, where affected containers were removed Wednesday night.

"The good news is that most likely this won't cause any harm to anybody, even if there was contamination," said Dr. Robert Insoft, director of that hospital's newborn intensive care unit.

Parents concerned if their children show digestive symptoms after drinking affected formula should contact their doctors, he said.

Abbott was consulting with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which is investigating.

In addition to formula, the Michigan production site, 140 miles east of Chicago, processes condensed skim milk, according to the state Department of Agriculture, which said it found no problems during the last inspection in July.

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The plant has received good marks the last few years, according to documents released under the Freedom of Information Act. The inspections cover "product lines, equipment and the structural integrity of the building itself," the department said.

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Tanner reported from Chicago, White from Detroit. Associated Press Writer Mary Clare Dale in Washington also contributed to this report.

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