

# **Final Minutes - Item 6: Joint COT/SACN working group on plant-based drinks - second draft report (Reserved) - TOX/2024/12**

**The item was previously being treated as reserved.**

## **Minutes for Item 6: Joint COT/SACN working group on plant-based drinks - second draft report (Reserved) - TOX/2024/12**

1. No interests were declared.
2. Professors Timothy Key and Susan Lanham-New who are part of the SACN plant-based drinks working group were in attendance for this item.
3. The UK government currently advises that first infant formula (which is usually based on cows' milk) is the only suitable alternative to breast milk in the first 12 months of a baby's life. Whole cows' milk can be given as a main drink from the age of 1 year. From this age, unsweetened calcium-fortified plant-based drinks, such as soya, almond and oat drinks can also be given to children, as part of a healthy, balanced diet.
4. As a result of an increasing number of enquiries about these drinks, the COT had been asked to consider the potential risks posed by soya, almond and oat drinks consumed in the diets of infants and young children. At the time of review, the Committee concluded that neither the safety of these drinks, nor the suitability of the current guidance, could be confirmed from a toxicological perspective, although any risks were likely to be low. A statement setting out the views of the Committee was published in 2021.

5. The SACN subgroup on Maternal and Child Nutrition (SMCN) also reviewed the suitability of these drinks from a nutritional perspective due to concerns that consumption of these drinks could lead to an increased risk of insufficient nutrient intakes.

6. Following these separate reviews, it was agreed that a joint SACN/COT working group be established to conduct a benefit: risk analysis considering both nutritional and toxicological aspects associated with the consumption of plant-based drinks by the UK population. It was agreed that the BRAFO methodology would be used.

7. The first draft of the report was discussed at the December COT meeting, and it was then revised to include the comments received from COT and SACN. The second draft report was attached at Annex A to paper TOX/2024/12. The cover paper included comments made by SACN at their March 2024 meeting.

8. The item is currently being treated as reserved as it is not yet finalised.

9. Discussions were focused on the potential toxicological risks arising from isoflavones in soya-based drinks. It was agreed that uncertainty existed around the potential safety risks and that the toxicological database was lacking. It was noted that individuals on a vegan diet where soya was the main source of protein would have higher exposures than those on a mixed diet, and these exposures could approach those arising from the consumption of soya formula, which was currently only recommended on medical advice.

10. COT Members requested consistent wording throughout the text. Changes to the language in the "Recommendation" paragraphs were also suggested to ensure an accurate reflection of the discussion.

11. Members reiterated their concern that allergenicity was out of scope of the report, although it was noted that there were allergenic concerns for all of the plant-based drinks under consideration as well as for cows' milk itself.

12. It was noted that the health implications of the differences in energy and free sugars between the drinks would vary, for example, reduced energy would be beneficial for some children who were overweight, but not for others.

13. Members highlighted the recent completion of EFSA's Update of the risk assessment of inorganic arsenic in food and noted the conclusion may be relevant

to the current paper. It was noted that rice drinks were excluded from consideration as there was existing advice that they were unsuitable for children due to their arsenic content.

14. The next plant-based drinks working group meeting will be held in May 2024, where the working group will take into consideration the comments made by the COT when updating their draft. It was confirmed that this draft would then be presented to the COT at a later date and/or at the next available meeting prior to proceeding with the open consultation.