

BY JOHN MUSENZE

# HEALTH MINISTRY ON ALERT AS 60 COUNTRIES RECALL BABY MILK FORMULA

The health ministry and standards regulators say they are on alert following a sweeping recall of infant milk formula products in more than 60 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, Singapore and several European Union (EU) member states.

The recalls affect multiple brands manufactured by global companies, such as Nestlé, Danone and Lactalis, after specific batches were found to be contaminated with cereulide toxin, a heat-stable toxin produced by *Bacillus cereus*.

All the affected brands, including Nestlé's SMA range, Aptamil and Cow & Gate, are widely sold in Uganda through supermarkets, pharmacies and private traders, as well as being given out in public health centres.

While no illness linked to the contaminated batches has been reported in Uganda so far, both the Ministry of Health and the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) say they are monitoring the situation closely.

Dr Samalie Namukose, the assistant commissioner for nutrition at the health ministry, confirmed that the ministry is aware of the international recalls.

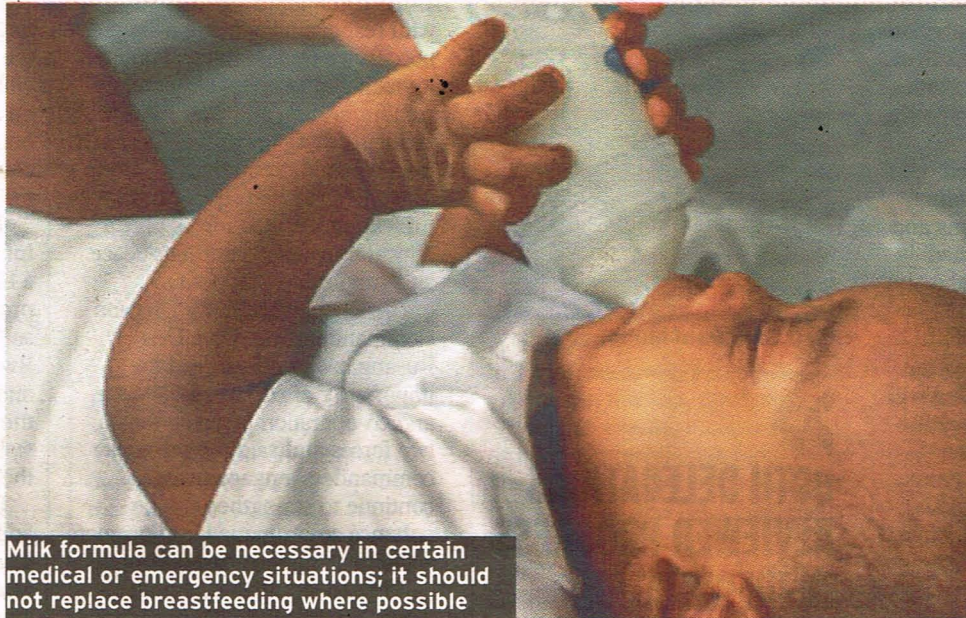
"We have seen reports, and we are concerned as a ministry. At the moment, we have not heard or recorded any babies with the reported signs and symptoms, but of course, the said recalled brands are on the market, so we are on alert for affected batches," Namukose said.

## LABORATORY ASSESSMENT

However, Dr Namukose acknowledged that Uganda has not yet conducted laboratory assessment on the said products.

"We have not done any assessment on whether the batches we have in the country are safe because it might require a lot of finance, which we do not have at the moment. It is something we are going to check out and assess," she said.

Namukose explained that the ministry's regulatory reach is limited largely to public health facilities.



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Dr Namusoke

"As the Ministry of Health, we can only have control over formulas that are in health facilities. But we know the private sector and traders are the lead sellers of these formulas. We encourage our mothers to breastfeed as much as possible because it is the safest food for the baby. But in case one has to supplement with baby formulas and powders, they should look at the labels on the tins of the formulas," she said.

## DEEPER CONCERNS

However, Dr Florence Basiimwa Tushemerirwe, a public health nutritionist and a research associate in the department of community health and behavioural sciences at the health ministry, said the recalls highlight deeper concerns around breast milk substitutes.

"When you go to supermarkets, you will find Aptamil; you will find Cow & Gate. These products are

heavily there. They are called breast milk substitutes," she said. Tushemerirwe emphasised that while formula can be necessary in certain medical emergencies, it should not replace breastfeeding where possible. She also warned that many formula products contain higher sugar and energy content, which may influence growth patterns.

"We programme these children from the beginning to get used to high-sugar, high-energy milk. A child taking formula does not grow at the same rate as a breastfed child. Often, they grow faster and bigger. We have no vaccine against breast milk. Breast milk is perfect," she said.

While this rapid growth may please parents, Tushemerirwe cautioned that it can increase the risk

of overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases later in life.

## UNICEF REPORT

In an email addressed to Uganda, which *The Weekend Vision* has seen, Joan N. Matji, the global director for child nutrition and development at the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), confirmed that the recall of baby powder milk is ongoing.

She added that the recall has, so far, been implemented in more than 60 countries. "We are closely monitoring developments and engaging with the World Health Organisation (WHO). As the lead technical agency, WHO is actively investigating the outbreak and providing regular updates to countries through the INFOSAN

## UNBS TAKE

Hakim Mufumbiro, the acting manager for certification at the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS), said the bureau conducted a desk review of import records after the recalls were announced. "We can make sure by checking the register of imported products. From the evidence which was provided, there was no risk to Africa because most of those products were traded in Europe," Mufumbiro said. He said UNBS could not trace the specific recalled batches to imports cleared into Uganda. "We did a desk review of all the information available for the regular imports of the products identified and we could not trace the batches that were implicated to the products imported from the same companies," he said.

Mufumbiro also stressed that Uganda cannot issue what he termed a "blind recall" because they have not seen any of the listed batch numbers on our imports. "The principle of recall is that it must be on to the batch which is actually suspected. We cannot issue a blind recall because the UK has issued one, or the US has done so. It has to be based on evidence of the product on the market," He added that UNBS relies on import inspection systems and conformity assessments conducted both locally and through international agents to ensure that products entering Uganda meet national standards.

"We assure mothers that our systems for import regulation are solid enough. We take extremely cautious control, especially for products which are for infants, because those are part of the vulnerable population," he said. However, Mufumbiro acknowledged broader systemic gaps. "Many people think UNBS is the competent authority for food control in Uganda, which is not true. We are only part of the competent authorities," he said, noting that Uganda is still in the process of establishing a comprehensive food safety authority through pending legislation.

Network on contamination sources, transmission pathways, and national response actions. WHO is also undertaking a broader review of guidance on the preparation of powdered infant formula, considering issues related to *Cronobacter sakazakii*, the recent botulism outbreak and cereulide toxin contamination, in collaboration with the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene," Matji said in a statement.

## BABY FORMULA USE IN UGANDA

Baby formula is primarily recommended as a substitute only when breastfeeding is not possible due to medical (e.g., HIV) or social reasons, with an emphasis on

exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months. Due to high infant mortality rates and risks, the Government regulates marketing and advocates for strict hygienic preparation. The health ministry regulates the marketing and sale of breast milk substitutes based on the 1981 International Code to protect breastfeeding.

Despite emphasis from the health ministry and UNICEF that breast milk is a safer alternative to formula milk, many mothers cite social pressures, such as work schedules, as a key reason for feeding babies with powdered milk. In the market, one tin costs between sh40,00 and sh100,000, usually lasting for a week.