

The latest Uganda National Bureau of Standards laboratory tests conducted on consignments available found no safety breaches.

BY WALTER MWESIGYE

The Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) has assured the public that baby formula products currently available on the Ugandan market are safe for consumption.

The UNBS reassurance follows growing concern among parents, coming hot on the heels of last month's global recall of selected brands of manufactured, nutritious baby food over safety concerns.

Food manufacturers Danone and Nestlé recalled specific batches of infant formula, including Aptamil, Cow & Gate, and SMA, over possible contamination. But officials from the government's standards agency said all baby formula imports undergo strict quality checks before being cleared for sale in the country.

UNBS officials said their laboratory tests conducted on consignments available in Uganda found no safety breaches, and the specific batches under recall are not present on the local market.

The manufactured baby food products are substitutes for human breast milk designed for infants under 12 months.

Mr Hakim Mufumbiro, who is in charge of the development of standards in the area of food and agriculture as well as managing certification services at UNBS, on Wednesday, said the regulator promptly initiated market surveillance immediately the recall was announced.

"Our surveillance team swung into action when the recall was first issued months ago. We were able to pick up samples on the market, and the products were tested in our food safety labs, which are accredited to test food products and the results released did not have any safety implications," he said.

The recall was triggered after traces of cereulide, a toxin produced by the bacterium *Bacillus cereus*, were detected in one batch of Aptamil First Infant Formula in January. Health experts warn that the toxin can cause symptoms such as vomiting and stomach cramps, particularly in infants whose immune systems are still developing.

The recall has affected 28 batches of in-

Baby foods on our market are safe, UNBS reassures



Officials from UNBS and the International Organisation for Standardisation conduct a stakeholder workshop on the coffee sector on February 17. The focus was on market standards and conformity assessment. PHOTO/UNBS

fant formula distributed across more than 60 countries, prompting regulatory agencies worldwide to conduct safety checks on their markets.

In Uganda, UNBS said it launched an investigation immediately after it received the recall notice, working with importers and distributors to verify whether any affected consignments had entered the country.

"Most of the baby formula foods are imported, and we test them rigorously through the pre-export verification of conformity programmes because these products are meant for a very vulnerable group. Therefore, the products must meet the Ugandan standards," Mr Mufumbiro said.

The standards body also emphasised that product recalls are a normal part of global food safety systems intended to protect consumers whenever a potential risk is detected.

"Ugandans should not be worried, the only downside is that it is the brands that are trading on the market, but it may not be the batches that are being

sold on the market; those are two different perspectives," he explained.

"The information from the manufacturers is that the recalls are specific to batches that were produced in a specific period because that is when the suspected products were produced. Our surveillance is undertaking the work up to this week and checking most of the supermarkets and pharmacies to confirm that the batches which are implicated are not on the market," he added.

HOW UNBS WORKS

UNBS's work begins with setting the standards that guide safety checks and certification. "UNBS' mandate is three-fold; we have been able to establish the standards of infant formula commonly known as baby food for all the different ages, and we start here because all the next steps and actions we undertake rely on the established standards,"

Ms Sylvia Kirabo, the Head of Marketing and Public Relations at UNBS, said the assessment done so far on the Ugandan market has found that the formula milk on the shelves is safe for babies.

"We have done preliminary market surveillance operations to look out for these particular batches and have not found any on our market. It's a continuous process for us, and we shall alert the public in case of any future developments," Ms Kirabo said.

Mr Hakim Mufumbiro, who is in charge of the development of standards in the area of food and agriculture as well as managing certification services at UNBS, said. The Food Standards Agency said some of the affected batch codes of SMA Infant Formula and Follow-on Formula products include 51200017Y3, 51210017Y1, 51250017Y1, 51460017Y1, 51710017Y1, and 53390346AB.

Manufacturers Danone and Nestlé have since indicated that the affected batches were produced some time ago and are unlikely to still be on retail shelves.

Why baby foods

Pediatricians in Uganda say infant formula remains a critical option for mothers who cannot breastfeed their babies, particularly for preterm infants or those with medical complications.

Dr Miriam Apio, a pediatrician at Case Hospital, said the hospital has not recorded any cases of infants presenting with symptoms linked to the recalled products.

"We recommend breast milk and were working with organisations that provide us with donor breast milk for our babies here at Case hospital, but in my practice, I know there are circumstances where some mothers have totally failed to produce breast milk due to several reasons ranging from disease, trauma and stress or you have a baby born near term and it's mother can't produce breast milk, in such difficult situations we advise the mother to alternatively use baby formula - a necessary evil- for the survival of the baby," Dr Apio said.

She added that there have not been reports of infants with symptoms linked to the cereulide toxin so far. "For us here at Case, we have not seen any upsurge of infants presenting with nausea, vomiting and stomach cramps as indicated by UK's National Health Service advisory," she said.

Health experts continue to encourage exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, in line with recommendations by the World Health Organisation, and the Ministry of Health, noting that breast milk remains the safest and most nutritious feeding option for infants.

UNBS said their market surveillance continues across the country to ensure all food products, including infant formula, comply with national safety standards. The regulator is also urging parents, retailers, and distributors to report any suspicious or expired baby formula products as part of ongoing efforts to safeguard the health of Ugandan infants.