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Got milk? Lamorinda moms not spared from the formula shortage

By Sharon K. Sobotta

When Carley Weiss went into labor with her now 3-month-old son, she never imagined being impacted by the formula shortage. "I always planned on breastfeeding," Weiss says. "But my son was tongue tied which made it difficult for him to get a good latch and painful for me." So after many unsuccessful attempts, Weiss resorted to baby formula. In the past, moms like Weiss might've been relieved to be able to have formula as an option, in spite of its hefty price tag of over \$40/can, to nourish their babies. Now, however, it's not that simple - not even in Lamorinda.

Absent the formula shortage, Weiss might have bought formula from the Moraga Safeway or another local store. Now, in the thick of it, Weiss is on a weekly scavenger hunt to find a sustained supply of nourishment for her child. "A few weeks ago, my husband and I realized after the 6 a.m. feeding, that we needed more formula. We jumped in the car and we went to three different Walmarts and had to go all the way to Vacaville to find formula," Weiss says. "Another day I was at Target and there was a mom crying in the formula aisle because she couldn't find formula for her baby. I got her number and texted her when I found the product she was looking for." Although Weiss is still on maternity leave from her job as a preschool teacher, the weekly hunt for baby formula has become a full-time endeavor. She has out-of-state family as far away as Idaho, searching for her brand and sending it to her. With inflation and record-high gas prices, the cost of driving from store to store is also adding up. "If we have to switch to a generic brand, I worry about how it will impact my baby's stomach," Weiss says.

Denise Witzig, Professor of Women's & Gender Studies at Saint Mary's College of California says, the nationwide formula shortage is infuriating and leaves her with more questions than answers. "Where is the government oversight of this? Why are so few corporations and so few businesses in charge of producing something that is so vital to many families and babies?"

Certified Lactation Counselor Yael Bromberg says that while the formula shortage is a symptom of the much larger issue of conglomeration, this one is harming the country's most vulnerable people. "Why do we have systems where there's a very small number of players in the formula industry in the United States? Why is it that when Abbot has a recall related to one of their plants, we're consolidated in such a critical way that the whole supply chain starts to crumble?"

Bromberg says it's naive for people to suggest just switching to breastfeeding if formula is unavailable.

"Babies in adoptive families or born to surrogates naturally can't just switch," Bromberg says. "(And neither can formula fed babies in general. If you don't use (breastmilk), you lose it. This is why breastfeeding rates decline sharply after six weeks when many women return to work."

Shameka Brown is a Sodexo caterer in Moraga and the single mom of three children. She stopped nursing her first two children after they were just over a month old, not because she didn't have a right to pump, but because she didn't know she did. "When I was having my son, my coworker told me I had the right to pump as many times as necessary in a day," Brown says. "So I did until he was 18 months old. My son is the only one of my children who didn't have (digestive) issues. I also lost my pregnancy weight very quickly and it was good for our bond."

As the infant formula shelf in the Lafayette Whole Foods remains empty and the selection of brands of formula in places like Safeway remains limited, many people are taking note of societal ironies as one mom noted on a local social media page. "Why is it that it's easier to buy guns (that kill people) than formula (to feed our babies)?" Even if Weiss and other local moms of infants are left with the same quandary, they can't wait for the formula shortage to be resolved. "We'll get through this," Weiss says. "But it's super stressful."

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