China expanding testing after latest milk scandal

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China will test a wider range of dairy products and even breast milk as authorities investigate claims that a brand of infant formula caused apparent breast growth in a small number of babies, an official newspaper reported Saturday.

It was the latest food safety scandal to shake China, which drew worldwide attention two years ago when more than 300,000 children were sickened and six died after drinking infant formula tainted by the industrial chemical melamine. It had been added to fool tests for protein content.

The Health Ministry is currently conducting quality tests on dairy products in the major cities of Beijing and Shanghai, the People's Daily reported, citing physician Liang Li who is on an expert panel at the ministry.

Items tested include formula made by China-based Synutra International Inc., the company named in the latest case, and other dairy products and breast milk, said Liang, an endocrinologist at the children's hospital under the Zhejiang University School of Medicine.

Synutra has rejected the parents' claims as "false and highly irresponsible," saying it does not add hormones to its products.

The report did not say how many products would be scrutinized.

Results were expected in coming days. Phones rang unanswered at the Ministry of Health on Saturday.

State media have said the babies with apparent breast growth were found to have abnormal levels of the hormones estradiol and prolactin, which stimulate lactation, or the making of breast milk.

Testing that includes samples of breast milk would help investigators pinpoint the source of the hormones, said Peter Ben Embarek, a food safety expert for the World Health Organization.

"Hormone disruptors can come from the food, in the case of a baby that could be through infant formula, but it could come through the environment or other sources. I think they are trying to get a picture of what possibly could have caused this," he said.

The Ministry of Health has also said growth hormones are forbidden in milk powder products in China.

Ben Embarek has said if hormones are found in the product, they were most likely

given to the dairy cows.

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