

Food in the first year of life

The first year of life is exciting and eventful for parents and babies, as dramatic changes in growth and eating patterns occur. Moving from breast or formula feeding alone to a diet including solid foods is important for a child's nutrition and development.

Baby's growth in the first 12 months

Babies grow quickly in the first year of life, so they need plenty of energy and nutrients.

Children's growth is not always steady and even, but can happen in spurts, which means that appetite and hunger can be unpredictable. The amount of food eaten by infants and their interest in food may vary slightly from day to day – this is normal and shouldn't cause any concerns if your baby is growing well.

Starting to eat solid foods is a learning experience for infants. It takes time and patience for baby to eat in a regular pattern.

When does baby need solid foods?

Breast milk, as the preferred choice, or infant formula is important food for babies until at least 12 months of age. It is also essential to introduce solid foods at the right time. At around six months of age, baby's iron stores are low and extra food is needed to prevent later nutritional problems such as iron deficiency.

Start to introduce solids at around six months of age. Babies are all different; some will be ready to have solids earlier than others. Watch your baby for signs of readiness as a guide.

How can I tell when baby is ready for solids?

At the same time that baby needs more nutrients, there will be other obvious signs they are ready to try solids such as:

- watching others eat, and leaning forwards when food is around
- opening mouth when food is offered
- reaching out to grab food and spoons.

If baby is not yet ready or interested in solids (or if they are full) when food is offered, they may:

- push their tongue out
- close their mouth tightly and turn their head away
- cry
- push the spoon away.

If this happens at your first attempts to feed baby, relax and try again in a few days.

While most babies naturally spit food out when first given solids, they soon learn to swallow if you continue.

Getting to know when baby is hungry or full, disinterested, or tired is important to having happy, relaxed and enjoyable mealtimes.



What can happen if solids are started too early or too late?

Some parents want to try solids early, believing this may help baby grow, sleep or settle better. Giving solids rarely helps these problems and may lead to:

- a greater chance of developing food allergies
- poor growth if the solid food replaces breast milk or formula
- loose bowel actions or diarrhoea if baby cannot digest the food.

Offer hungry babies more breastmilk or formula feeds until they are ready for solids.

It is also important that starting solids is not left too late as this may lead to:

- poor growth due to low energy intake
- iron deficiency anaemia
- feeding problems, particularly if not started before about seven to nine months of age.

What is the best way to introduce food?

Food should be offered on a small infant-sized spoon – it should never be placed in a feeding bottle. Tips for introducing solids include:

- Be calm and relaxed when you start to feed baby.
- Make sure baby is sitting comfortably and is not too hungry or distressed.
- Introduce one new food at a time, trying it for several days before adding another.
- Babies often refuse new foods when first offered. It may take 5-10 tries before a new food is accepted.
- Stay with baby when they are eating, letting them sit with the family to watch and learn.
- Baby may only take a spoonful at first, but this will increase with time and practice.
- Be patient (and prepared!) – all babies will make a mess as they learn to eat.

What foods should I introduce first?

First foods can be prepared easily and cheaply at home. It is not necessary to add salt, sugar or other additives to your baby's food.

There are no hard and fast rules about what foods baby should have and when. Some suggestions are:

- Start with a single food rather than a mixture. Infant rice cereal is recommended as it is easy to digest, the correct consistency and fortified with iron. Try ½ to 1 teaspoon after a breast or formula feed.
- Once rice cereal is accepted try smooth vegetables then fruits.
- When baby is eating vegetables and fruits try introducing meats, fish and chicken, and other cereals (breads, pasta, whole-wheat cereal). Remember to wait several days between each new food.

- Try small amounts of cow's milk in custard, yoghurt and on cereal once baby is eating meats or chicken.
- Avoid small hard foods such as nuts and uncooked vegetables, due to the risk of choking.
- Fruit juice, cordial and soft drinks are not recommended for infants.

Food suggestions to prevent allergies

If baby has a strong family history of allergic disease, some things to try to prevent allergies include:

- Where possible breastfeed.
- If it isn't possible to breastfeed, a partially hydrolysed (hypo allergenic) formula rather than cow's milk formula is recommended for the first six months of life.
- Delay the introduction of solid foods until baby is six months of age.

When do I change the texture of food?

- First solids should be finely mashed and smooth, but quickly increase textures to coarsely mashed.
- Offer finger foods such as pieces of cooked vegetables and crusts at about seven months to encourage chewing and self-feeding.
- Give baby a small spoon to self-feed, even while you continue to give most food.
- Encourage drinking from a cup from about six months of age. Ideally bottle use should be stopped from around 12 months.

When can I use cow's milk?

Pasteurised full fat cow's milk may be included in small amounts as custard, yoghurt or on cereal in your baby's diet. However, cow's milk should not be your baby's main drink until after one year of age. Cow's milk is a poor source of iron and is never a substitute for breast milk or formula in babies under 12 months. Reduced fat milks are not recommended in the first two years of life.

Important tips about introducing solids

- Continue breast milk or infant formula until at least one year of age.
- Start solid foods at around six months – watch for signs of readiness as a guide.
- There are no hard and fast rules about what foods baby should have and when.
- Learn to recognise when baby is interested in eating and when they are full.
- Be patient, foods may be spat out at first when learning to eat new textures.
- First foods need to be finely mashed and smooth but quickly increase food textures.
- Encourage self-feeding from around seven to eight months.
- Stay with your child while eating to avoid accidents such as choking.
- Mealtimes should be fun, relaxed and happy.
- Be a positive role model – children learn to eat by watching other people.

Photograph by Fiona Basile.

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