

Weaning

Starting solid food



The information in this leaflet will help you wean your baby onto solid foods.

Your baby's development from breast or formula milk feeding to sharing in the family meal is one of the first stages of growing up.

Enjoy it. Encourage it. Don't force it.

Let it happen at its own pace, and if you have any worries talk to your health visitor.

What is weaning?



Weaning means introducing a range of foods gradually until your baby is eating the same foods as the rest of your family.

Until six months, your baby needs only breastmilk or infant formula milk. Around six months your baby needs more than milk alone and is able to eat solid foods in addition to breast or formula milk.

When to start

At about six months babies are ready to be moved onto a mixed diet.

Try giving solid foods when your baby:

- can sit up
- wants to chew and is putting toys and other objects in their mouth
- reaches and grabs accurately.

It is normal for babies aged three to five months to begin waking in the night when they have previously slept through. It is not necessarily a sign of hunger and starting solids will not make your baby more likely to sleep through the night again.



IMPORTANT

Never leave your baby alone when eating.



Health experts agree that around six months is the best age for introducing solids. Before this, your baby's digestive system is still developing and weaning too soon may increase the risk of infections and allergies. Weaning is also easier at six months. If your baby seems hungrier at any time before six months, they may be having a growth spurt, and extra breast or formula milk will be enough to meet their needs.

If you decide to wean at any time before six months, there are some foods that should be avoided as they may cause allergies or make your baby ill. These include wheat-based foods and other foods containing gluten (e.g. bread, rusks, some breakfast cereals), eggs, fish, shellfish, nuts, seeds and soft and unpasteurised cheeses. Ask your health visitor for advice, especially if your baby was premature.

Solid foods should never be introduced before four months.

How to start

Start by offering a small amount of mashed vegetable, fruit or cereal mixed with milk after a milk feed or in the middle of one, if this works better. If the food is hot, allow it to cool, stir it and test it before giving it to your baby.

Some babies take time to learn to eat new foods. Your baby will be finding out about different tastes and textures and learning that food doesn't come in a continuous flow. Be patient, let your baby touch the food if they want to, and be prepared for some mess.

- Start by offering just a few teaspoons of food, once a day.
- Use a little of your baby's usual milk (breast or formula) to mix the food to the desired consistency.
- Allow your baby to feed themselves, using their fingers, as soon as they show an interest.
- Give your baby a range of foods and textures to taste.
- Don't force feed your baby. If your baby doesn't seem to want it, wait and try again later.
- If you are using a spoon, wait for your baby to open their mouth when the food is offered.
- Let your baby touch the food in the dish or on the spoon.
- If you are bottle feeding, don't add any foods (including rusks, cereal or sugar) to the milk.

HANDY HINT

Make sure your baby is sitting up straight and is facing forward. A highchair is best. This way your baby is able to explore foods better and will be less likely to choke.

First foods



You could try:

- cereals such as baby rice mixed with milk
- mashed cooked vegetables such as parsnip, potato, yam, sweet potato or carrot
- mashed banana, avocado, cooked apple or pear
- pieces of soft fruit or vegetables small enough for your baby to pick up.

Use mashed-up family food when you can. It's best to cook your own food for your baby. This way, you'll know the ingredients of the food and you'll be getting your baby used to eating what you eat. Don't add salt or sugar to food for your baby.

HANDY HINT

Allow plenty of time for feeding, particularly at first. Don't rush or force feed your baby. Most babies know when they've had enough to eat. Be patient, and go at your baby's pace.

More foods to try

Once your baby is used to eating vegetables and fruit you should add other foods, such as:

- puréed or mashed-up meat, fish and chicken
- mashed rice, noodles or pasta
- lentils (dhal) or pulses
- full-fat dairy products, such as yoghurt, fromage frais or custard. Choose lower sugar varieties.

See how your baby responds to the different flavours and textures. Offer your baby finger foods such as small pieces of fruit and vegetables or toast. How much your baby takes is less important than getting used to the idea of food other than milk.

Finger foods

Encourage your baby to chew, even if they don't have teeth, by giving finger foods. For example, cooked and cooled green beans or carrot sticks, cubes of cheese, toast, bread, pitta bread or chapatti, peeled apple and banana. Some babies prefer food they can hold to mashed foods, so offer your baby finger foods from the beginning. Finger foods provide chewing practice and encourage babies to feed themselves.



Avoid sweet biscuits and rusks so that your baby does not get into the habit of expecting sweet snacks.

Cups

If you are bottle feeding, comfort sucking on a bottle can become a habit that's hard to break. Introduce a cup from six months and aim to have your baby off the bottle by their first birthday. Using an open cup, or a free-flow cup without a valve, will help your baby learn to sip and is better for your baby's teeth.



HANDY HINT

Offer sips of water from a cup with meals. If you choose to give pure juice, dilute it one part juice to ten parts water, and offer it only at mealtimes.

CHOKING

Babies can choke on foods so be careful with hard foods such as raw carrot sticks or large apple pieces or small round foods like grapes and cherry tomatoes. Also be careful with foods with skin (like sausages) or fish with bones. Cut food into small pieces and remove all skin and bones or lightly cook vegetables like carrots before feeding to your baby.

How much and how often



When you are both ready, you can start to increase the amount of solid food you give. Try to react to your baby's appetite, so if your baby is still hungry, you can give a little more. Your baby is the best guide to how much solid food you need to give. Progress from offering solid food once a day to solid food at two and then three feeds. Offer different foods at each of the three meals to give more variety.

Begin to add different foods and different tastes. You'll be able to use lots of the foods you already cook for yourself. Just mash a small amount cooked with no added salt or sugar and give it a try.

Offer foods from each of the following food groups:

- starchy – such as potatoes, yams, rice or bread
- fruit and vegetables
- protein – meat, fish, eggs, tofu or pulses such as beans and lentils.

Red meat (beef, lamb and pork) is an excellent source of iron. Eggs are a quick and nutritious source of protein, but make sure they are thoroughly cooked until both the white and yolk are solid.

Solid foods and milk

You will find that as your baby eats more solid foods, the amount of milk your baby wants will start to reduce. Once your baby is eating plenty of solids several times a day, you can drop a milk feed but continue to breastfeed or give 500–600ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day until at least 12 months of age. Breastfeeding will continue to benefit you and your baby for as long as you choose to carry on.

Cow's milk is not suitable as a drink until your baby is 12 months old but can be used in cooking.



From about nine months

From about nine months, offer your baby:

- three to four servings of starchy food each day, such as potato, bread and rice
- three to four servings of fruit and vegetables. Vitamin C in fruit and vegetables helps to absorb iron, so give fruit and vegetables at mealtimes
- two servings of meat, fish, eggs, dhal or other pulses.

By now your baby should be learning to fit in with the family by eating three minced or chopped meals a day as well as milk. Your baby may also like healthy snacks such as fruit or toast in between meals.



HANDY HINT

Include your baby in the family mealtime routine. Feed your baby while family members are eating.



If your baby is on the move, you may need to increase the amount of food you give. Babies have small tummies, and they need energy for growth, so make sure you give them full-fat dairy products, such as yoghurt, fromage frais and cheese. Cutting back on fat is sensible for adults but not for babies.

If you have decided not to give your baby meat or fish, make sure that you give two servings a day of pulses (dhal, split peas, hummus), tofu, TVP or eggs.

Vitamins

Vitamin D is naturally present in only a few foods such as fortified margarines, eggs and fatty fish. It is also made naturally in the skin when it is exposed to gentle sunlight. It is sensible to give all children vitamin drops with vitamins A, C and D from the age of one to five years old. Breastfed babies, and babies drinking less than 500ml of infant formula milk per day, should begin vitamin drops at six months, or earlier if advised by your health visitor or doctor. Ask your health visitor about Healthy Start children's vitamin drops.

HANDY HINT

Offer a wide variety of foods that you and your family usually eat, as this might help avoid fussiness later on.

Starting good habits early

It's important to start good eating habits early as it can be much harder to change things once your baby is older. Setting good habits now can help your baby to grow up into a healthy child and adult.

- Up to 12 months, babies are usually willing to try new foods, so use the opportunity to introduce a wide variety of foods, with different tastes and textures.
- Try to offer family foods as often as possible.
- Get your baby used to eating a variety of fruit and vegetables, meat, fish or alternatives, and starchy foods, and offer sweet foods only occasionally or not at all.



Eating as a family



Eating as a family encourages your baby to get into good habits from a young age. If your baby is used to eating a variety of the foods the rest of the family eats – although they may need to be cut up a bit smaller – then they are less likely to be a fussy eater as they get older.

- Sit your baby in a highchair at the table and smile and talk to your baby to make them feel included.
- Give your baby the same food as the rest of the family – even if it has to be mashed up first. But remember to leave out the salt.
- Encourage babies and young children to feed themselves with finger foods, and let them decide when they've had enough.
- Don't worry if feeding your baby is messy! It's natural for babies to want to touch or play with their food when they're beginning to feed themselves – it's all part of learning. A plastic tablecloth, newspapers or an old sheet or towel on the floor will make it easier to clean up afterwards.

Healthy snacks

Some ideas for healthy and nutritious snacks include:

- toast, pitta or chappati fingers, bread sticks, rice cakes.
Choose low-salt or salt-free versions whenever possible
- pieces of chopped fruit or vegetable sticks
- small cubes of cheese.



HANDY HINT

Try to organise mealtimes for the same time every day – your baby will know what to expect and is more likely to be happy to eat their meals.

Coping with fussy eaters

If your baby is a fussy eater, here are some things you can do to help.

- Praise your baby when they eat well and don't get frustrated or angry if your baby doesn't eat.
- Don't worry if your baby doesn't like certain foods – simply leave it for now and try them again in a week or so. Babies like familiar foods and sometimes you need to offer a food more than 10 times before your baby will try it.
- Set a good example and let your baby see you eating and enjoying a variety of foods.
- Don't worry if your baby doesn't eat much one day. Appetites vary and what your baby eats over the course of a week is more important.



Allergies

Babies are more likely to develop allergies if there is a family history of eczema, asthma or hayfever. For these families, exclusive breastfeeding is particularly recommended for the first six months. Introduce the foods that commonly cause allergies (milk, eggs, wheat, nuts, seeds, fish and shellfish) one at a time so that you can spot any reaction, but don't introduce any of these foods before six months. Avoid giving peanuts and foods containing peanut products, e.g. peanut butter or groundnut oil, until your child is three years old.

Soya-based infant formulas should only be used on the advice of your GP. Some babies who are allergic to cow's milk may also be allergic to soya. Infant formulas based on goat's milk protein have not been approved for use in Europe.



Foods to avoid

SALT (which contains sodium)

Do not add any salt to foods for babies. Do not use stock cubes or gravy in your baby's food as they are often high in salt.

When you are cooking for the family, do not add salt, so your baby can share the family foods.

SUGAR

Sugar can encourage a sweet tooth and lead to tooth decay when first teeth start to come through. Try mashed banana, breast or formula milk to sweeten food if necessary.

HONEY

Don't give honey until your baby is one year old. Very occasionally, it can contain a type of bacteria, which can produce toxins in the baby's intestines and can cause a very serious illness (infant botulism).

Remember that honey is also a sugar and can lead to tooth decay.

NUTS

Whole nuts, including peanuts, should not be given to children under five years in case of choking.

LOW-FAT FOODS

Low-fat foods, whether yoghurt, fromage frais, cheese or fat spreads are not suitable for babies or children under two. Fat is an important source of calories and some vitamins which they need.

REMEMBER TO CHECK THE FOOD LABEL.

Ready-prepared baby foods

It can be useful to have a few jars, tins or packets of baby food in the cupboard, but don't let them replace family food altogether. Your baby needs to learn to eat family foods.

If you buy baby foods:

- Check the 'use by' and 'best before' dates.
- Check that the seals on cans and jars haven't been broken.
- Choose 'sugar free' foods, or foods which do not contain added sugars or sweeteners.
- Some baby foods may say 'suitable from four months' on the label but health experts agree that around six months is the best age to start solid foods.



Remember to check the label of any food product you use to make family meals. Many of the food products we buy such as sauces, soups, breakfast cereals and ready-prepared meals are high in salt and sugars. Try to check the labels for healthier versions.



HANDY HINT

Cover the floor with newspapers or a protective mat and use a bib to catch food spills. Weaning can be a messy business.

Safety and hygiene



Ensure your baby is not at risk from germs as a result of food preparation and serving.

- Always wash your hands well before preparing your baby's food.
- Check that your baby's hands are clean before feeding.
- Keep surfaces clean and prevent pets from coming near food or surfaces where food is prepared.

- Keep chopping boards thoroughly clean.
- Keep cooked and raw meats covered and away from each other and from other foods in the fridge.
- Thoroughly wash all bowls and spoons for feeding in hot soapy water.
- Don't save and re-use foods that your baby has half eaten. It may result in a tummy upset.
- Cooked food should not be reheated more than once.
- Cook all food thoroughly and cool it to a lukewarm temperature before giving it to your baby.
- Wash and peel fruit and vegetables, such as apples and carrots.
- Avoid raw eggs and raw shellfish.

Storing and reheating food

- Cool food as quickly as possible (ideally within one to two hours) and place it in the fridge or freezer. Food placed in the fridge should be eaten within two days.
- Make sure that frozen food is thoroughly defrosted before reheating. The safest way to do this is in the fridge overnight or using the defrost setting on a microwave.
- Reheat food thoroughly so it is piping hot all the way through. Allow it to cool before offering it to your baby.
- To cool food quickly, place the food in an airtight container and hold it under a cold running tap, stirring the contents from time to time to allow cooling throughout.

HEALTHY START

If you have children under four or are pregnant and on benefits, or if you're pregnant and under 18, you could qualify for Healthy Start. With Healthy Start, you can get free vouchers every week which you can spend on milk, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables and infant formula milk. You can also get free vitamins. Ask your health visitor or midwife for details or visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk

Even if you don't qualify for Healthy Start you can still buy Healthy Start children's vitamin drops or Healthy Start vitamins for women. Ask your health visitor or midwife for details.



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