
Eating tips for babies

Summary

- Start to introduce solids at around six months of age.
 - First solids should be finely mashed and smooth, then graded to coarsely mashed quickly. Your baby may only take a spoonful at first, but this will increase with time and practice.
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Babies grow quickly in the first year of life, so they need plenty of energy (kilojoules) and nutrients. A child's growth isn't always steady and even, which means that appetite and hunger can be unpredictable.

The amounts of foods eaten by your baby and their interest in food may be a little different from day to day. This is normal and shouldn't cause any concerns if your baby is growing well.

Introduce solids around 6 months of age

Breast milk is an important food for babies until at least 12 months of age, (or longer if you and baby desire).

If you are feeding your baby infant formula, this is important until 12 months.

By around 6 months of age, your baby's iron stores are low and extra foods will be needed to maintain healthy growth and prevent nutritional problems such as iron deficiency.

Start to introduce solids around six months of age – when your baby starts showing interest in food.

Clues that your baby is ready for solids

When your baby starts to need the nutrients that solid food can provide, there will be obvious signs they are ready to try solid foods. These include:

- Good head control and able to sit up with support
- Watching and leaning forwards when food is around
- Reaching out to grab food or spoons to put in their mouth
- Opening their mouth when food is offered.

Physical readiness for solids

Your baby's organs and body grow and develop certain physical traits between four and six months. This indicates that their body is ready physically for solids. This maturing process includes:

- **Digestive system** – digestive enzymes that help to digest food are developed.
- **Immune system** – immune gut defense mechanism is fully developed.
- **Mouth and tongue** – your baby is able to move food to the back of their mouth and swallow safely.
- **Head and neck** – your baby is able to hold their head up; head control helps them to sit up straight and swallow.
- **Kidneys** – your baby's kidneys can now handle the increased load produced by solids.

Starting solids too early can cause problems

Hungry babies should be offered more breast or formula feeds until they are ready for solids. Some parents want to try solids early, believing this may help baby grow, sleep or settle better. Giving solids too early rarely helps these problems and may lead to other difficulties including:

- Poor growth, if the solid food replaces breast milk or formula
 - Loose bowel actions or diarrhea, if the baby cannot digest the food.
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Don't leave starting solids too late

It's also important that starting solids is not left too late, as this may lead to problems including:

- Poor growth due to low energy intake
- Iron deficiency anemia
- Feeding problems, particularly if not started before about seven to nine months of age.

Signs that your baby is not interested

Signs that your baby is not interested or is full may include closing the mouth tightly and turning the head away when offered food. They may cry when the food is offered or may push the spoon away. If this happens at your first attempts to feed your baby, relax and try again in a few days. While most babies naturally spit food out when first given solids, they soon learn to accept foods if you continue.

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

Tips for introducing solids

- Be calm and relaxed when you start to feed your baby.
- Make sure your child is sitting comfortably and is not too hungry.
- Be patient. Your baby may only take a spoonful at first, but this will increase with time and practice.
- Be prepared – all babies will make a mess as they learn to eat.
- Stay with your child while eating to avoid accidents such as choking.
- Try again in a day or so if your baby refuses the first time.
- Offer foods on a small, infant-sized spoon.

Suggested first foods

First foods can be prepared easily and cheaply at home without salt, seasonings and sweeteners. The foods should at first be mashed and smooth, but you can quickly move on to coarsely mashed foods and coarser textures. General suggestions include:

- Start with a single food rather than a mixture.
- Start with iron-fortified cereal (mixed to a smooth texture with expressed breast milk or formula) and/or an iron-rich food (such as pureed meat, chicken, fish, egg, cooked plain tofu or legumes).
- As long as iron-rich foods are the first foods, other nutritious foods (such as pureed fruit and vegetables) can be introduced in any order at a rate that suits your baby.
- Offer coarsely pureed or mashed foods and progress to lumpy and finely chopped options by 8 months.
- Always sit with your baby while they are eating.
- Encourage drinking water from a cup.

Later feeding skills – from 8 to 9 months

While a baby's first solids should be mashed and smooth, they soon need variety in the texture as well as the type of food. Food suggestions for babies from 8 to 9 months include:

- Chopped and finger foods – such as pieces of tender meats, cooked vegetables, soft diced fruit and bread crusts, to encourage chewing and self-feeding.
- Give baby a small spoon to encourage self-feeding, even while you continue to give most of the food.

By the end of 12 months, your baby should be ready to eat a wide variety of family food.

- Offer more variety of fruit, vegetables, meats, chicken and well-cooked fish
- Introduce pasta, rice and bread
- Small amounts of cows milk on cereals, as custard, cheese and yogurt. The main milk for babies less than 12 months should be breast milk or infant formula. However, it's okay to introduce and use cows milk as part of custard, yogurt and on cereal from seven to eight months of age.

Stay with your baby when they are eating. Let them sit with the family to watch and learn.

At around nine months your baby will develop other feeding skills. These include:

- Showing an interest in self-feeding
- Ability to chew lumps in food
- Independent eating with some assistance.

Always avoid small hard foods, such as nuts and hard uncooked vegetables, because babies might choke. Fruit juice is not suitable for babies.

Introducing cows milk

Suggestions include:

- Cows milk is a poor source of iron and is never a substitute for breast milk or formula for babies under 12 months. Continue breastfeeding or using infant formula until your baby is at least one year old.
- Cows milk contains higher levels of protein, salt, potassium and calcium than breast milk or formula. This can increase the load on the kidneys.
- Cows milk may be included from about eight months in small amounts as custard or yoghurt or on cereal.
- Milk should not be the main drink until after one year of age or until a range of food is eaten each day, including meat or meat alternatives.

Allergy and vegetarianism

There are issues to consider when you introduce solids to your baby, especially if your baby has shown signs of allergies or your family eats a vegetarian diet.

- **Allergy** – if there is a strong history of allergy in your family, seek advice from your doctor or maternal and child health nurse.
- **Vegetarians** – your baby may need extra nutrients if fed on a vegetarian diet. Seek advice from your doctor or maternal and child health nurse.

Unsuitable foods

Some foods are not suitable for babies under 12 months. These include:

- **Honey** – there is a potential risk of bacterial infection from honey.
- **Tea** – contains tannins that can restrict vitamin uptake.
- **Whole nuts** – should be avoided due to the risk of choking.
- **Fruit juice** – contains no nutritional benefit and can reduce the amount of milk consumed.
- **Reduced fat milk** – is not suitable for children under two.

Where to get help

- **Your GP (doctor)**
- **Dietitians Australia** Tel. **1800 812 942**
- **Your local maternal and child health service**
- **Maternal and Child Health Line** Tel: **13 22 29** – available 24 hours a day for the cost of a local call throughout Victoria
- **Parentline** Tel. **13 22 89**
- **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National)** Tel. **131 450** – available (24 hours, 7 days a week) for callers who speak other languages.
- **National Relay Service** (24 hours a day, every day) – Speak and listen Tel: **1300 555 727**, TTY Tel: **133 677**, SMS relay Tel: **0423 677 767**. **Captioned, internet and video relay calls are also available through this service.**
- **Australian Breastfeeding Association** Tel: **1800 mum2mum** or Tel: **1800 686 268**

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