

When do I introduce solids to my baby?



NCT Information sheet

Offering your baby their first solid foods can be an anxious time for parents: when to start? How much to give? Which foods to offer?

Traditionally, parents were encouraged to start babies on solids earlier than they are today. However, we now know that introducing solids too early can be damaging for a baby's health in the long term. Also, milk contains all the nutrients a baby needs. This means that if milk feeds are replaced too early, babies lose out on some of those important nutrients.

Sometimes parenthood can seem like a race in which babies and children are moved on to the next stage as early as possible, and starting solids early can be part of that race. Parents can feel under pressure to take part, but you do not have to. You can choose to introduce solids to your baby when the time seems right for you both.

If your baby is breastfed

Research indicates that babies who are breastfed do not need to start on solid foods until they are about six months. Babies who are introduced to solid foods earlier than that are more likely to get diarrhoea and chest infections. Also, if solid foods are started early, the baby is likely to take less breastmilk, yet breastmilk contains more energy and nutrients than vegetable or fruit purées.

For babies from families with allergies, the protein in formula or solids is more likely to trigger an allergy if the baby is less than six months old.

If your baby is formula-fed

There is less research on introducing solids to babies who are receiving only formula or mainly formula. However, the signs of readiness will be the same and there is no evidence that formula-fed babies need solid foods any earlier.

What the experts say

Based on research on babies' readiness for solid foods, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Unicef recommend that, in general, babies have nothing but breastmilk

for the first six months after birth. Solids can then gradually be introduced from six months, with breastfeeding continuing for up to two years or beyond. This is a broad recommendation. Babies are all different; some will be ready for solids earlier and some later.

For some parents, the baby's readiness for solids is not the only factor to consider; for example, returning to work may affect the decision.

Most governments agree that six months is the recommended age for introducing solid foods, with breastmilk or formula continuing to be the main source of nourishment for the first year.

Advantages of starting around six months

At around 6-9 months changes occur in babies' mouths that help them cope with the change from drinking to eating. Babies younger than this may be more at risk of choking on solid foods.

For parents, leaving solid foods until around six months means less time spent preparing smooth purées – as babies can then cope with finger foods and lumpy foods more quickly – and also fewer smelly nappies.

Mothers who encourage their babies to help themselves to solid foods (an approach called baby-led weaning), rather than spoon-feeding them, say that this makes introducing solids an easier, more enjoyable and sociable experience.

If you are breastfeeding, continuing to six months or more means your baby receives more antibodies and other protective factors. Giving only breastmilk also means your baby is less exposed to harmful bacteria. Babies are more likely than adults to develop diarrhoea and vomiting from such exposure as they have less acid in their stomachs.

Risks of starting solids early

Babies do not actually produce all the enzymes needed to digest food thoroughly until they are about a year old. Under four months, any foods other than milk could



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put a strain on the baby's kidneys and the larger molecules in food are more likely to trigger an allergy. Although a baby given solids early may appear fine at the time, there are increased risks of eczema, wheezing and chest infections in childhood.

Will my baby get enough iron?

Babies are born with iron stores so they do not need to take in much from their diet at first. Most breastfed babies receive enough iron from breastmilk to keep the stores they were born with topped up. Babies born with low stores, perhaps because they were premature or small-for-dates, may benefit from iron supplements. Also, a baby whose mother's iron level is low may benefit from an iron supplement before six months. If you think this applies to you, talk to your doctor, paediatrician or health visitor.

Only part of the iron in formula milk is absorbed so all brands have extra iron added. This means formula fed babies do not generally need any extra iron, although premature babies might.

However, anaemia (low iron levels) is one of the most common problems in young children, so iron-rich foods need to be included once your baby starts taking solids. These can include red meat, pulses (peas and beans), and iron-fortified cereals. Vitamin C (in fresh fruit, and fresh or frozen vegetables) at the same meal helps your baby absorb the iron.

Signs of readiness

Your baby may be ready for solid foods if he:

- can sit up; this lets him take an active part in eating solids
- no longer automatically pushes solids out of his mouth (young babies have this tongue-thrusting reflex)
- starts to show an interest in what you are eating and may seem keen to have nibbles of what you are having (if you want to share your food with your baby, check it is suitable)
- can pick up food and put it in his mouth; again, he is taking an active part in the process.

Your baby may also seem hungrier. However, this is not a helpful signal on its own as babies sometimes show appetite spurts. You can respond to your baby's increased need for milk by feeding more frequently for a few days if breastfeeding, or giving more milk if formula-feeding.

Although there is a widespread belief that solids will help babies to sleep through the night, this is not supported by research evidence. Some individual babies may sleep longer but in general they do not.

Most babies start to cut teeth at around

six months, which helps with biting and chewing food. Some babies do get their first teeth earlier than this and a baby who is unsettled and putting his fists in his mouth a lot may be teething rather than hungry.

How to start

The baby's digestive system can get used to solids best if the foods are introduced gradually, one new food at a time. Then if your baby has a reaction it will be easier to work out what caused it. If you start your baby on solids at less than six months this means starting with as little as one teaspoon of purée at a meal. However, for babies of around six months, mashing with a fork is enough, and mothers report that some babies can cope with, and prefer, soft finger foods such as cooked carrots or a piece of pear.

Symptoms of food sensitivity include rashes, wheezing, red itchy eyes, fussiness or being unsettled, constipation and diarrhoea.

Homemade foods are cheaper, tend to be more nutritious and enable you to introduce one food at a time (commercial foods are often a mixture of ingredients.) It may work best to offer food after a milk feed, as if your baby is too hungry he could get frustrated with the new experience.

First foods

Vegetables make good first foods. Cooked carrot, potato, parsnip, turnip and sweet potato can be offered as pieces of finger food or chopped, sieved or mashed, the smoothness depending on your baby's age. For a younger baby, you can add expressed breastmilk, formula or the water the vegetables were cooked in. Rice and cornmeal are also suitable, and babies are less likely to react to these than to foods made with wheat, which contains gluten and is not recommended for babies under six months (boiled or ground rice can be blended with a little breastmilk, formula or boiled water.) Food for babies should not have salt added, either at the cooking stage or afterwards.

Drinks

Breastmilk or formula milk is recommended as the main source of food for the first year. Water can be offered in a beaker or cup with meals. This is especially important if you are formula feeding, as if babies are thirsty they may take more formula milk than they need. Frequent drinks of fruit juice, even if it is diluted, can damage babies' teeth, as their enamel is not as strong as in adults' teeth. Full-fat cow's milk is not recommended as a main milk drink before babies are one year old, although they can have it in foods such as pancakes, scrambled eggs and mashed potatoes or on cereals.

Skimmed and semi-skimmed milk are not suitable for children under two years as children need to get a good part of their energy from fat in their food.

We hope you will enjoy helping your baby to share in family meals, when the time is right for you.

Resources

Lilly R. The National Childbirth Trust (NCT) *First foods and weaning: weaning guide with easy recipes*. Revised edition London: Thorsons; 2002. (Code 2159 £6.99). www.nctshop.co.uk 08458 100 100.

A little of what you fancy: an article on baby-led weaning www.nct.org.uk/info-centre/articles/view/21

Eat, drink and be messy: an article on the NCT website www.nct.org.uk/info-centre/articles/view/31

Cup-drinking: an article on the NCT website www.nct.org.uk/info-centre/articles/view/82

Baby-led weaning: a DVD available from NCT Shop (Code 4522 P £30). www.nctshop.co.uk

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