

Introducing solids

It pays to wait until they're ready

Introduction to solid foods is a really important step in your child's development. Babies can get all the nutrients they need from breast milk until they are around six months old. Up until this time their digestive system is still developing and it can't yet cope with solid foods.

To begin with, how much your baby takes is less important than getting them used to the idea of eating. They will still be getting most of their nutrition from breast milk, so do not stop.

Babies do not need three meals a day to start with, so you can begin by offering foods at a time that suits you both. Gradually, you'll be able to increase the amount and variety of food your baby eats, until they can eventually eat the same as the rest of the family, in smaller portions. It can be great fun to explore new flavours and textures together.

Every baby is an individual, but there are three clear signs (see below) that, together, show your baby is ready for solid foods alongside breast milk or formula. It's very rare for these signs to appear together before your baby is six months old.

Getting started with solid foods

- Always stay with your baby when they are eating in case they start to choke.
- Let your baby enjoy touching food.
- Allow your baby to feed themselves, using their fingers, as soon as they show an interest.
- Do not force your baby to eat, this is a gradual process.
- If you are using a spoon, wait for your baby to open their mouth before you offer the food (do not try to force the food in). Your baby may like to hold a spoon too.
- Start by offering just a few pieces or teaspoons of food, once a day.
- Make sure you cool hot food (and test it before giving it to your baby).
- Do not add salt, sugar or stock cubes to your baby's food or in cooking.

First foods - Include mashed or soft cooked fruit and vegetables like parsnip, potato, sweet potato, carrot, apple or pear, all cooled before eating. Soft fruits like peach or melon, or baby rice or baby cereal mixed with your baby's usual milk, are good as well. Do not add salt or sugar.

Finger foods - Finger food is food that is cut up into pieces big enough for your baby to hold. Things like slices of cucumber, carrot, banana or melon cut into pieces about the size of your own finger.

Next foods - Once your baby is used to the idea of more solid foods you can try soft cooked meat such as chicken or mashed fish (check for bones), pasta, noodles, toast or pieces of chapati, rice and mashed hard-boiled eggs. They can also have full-fat dairy products such as yoghurt, or fromage frais.

Whole cows' milk can be used in cooking or mixed with food from six months.

They're sweet enough already!

If you give your baby sweet things they are likely to get a taste for it. In fact giving babies food and drink with added sugar or honey can cause serious problems. Here's why sugar is not so sweet:

- Sugar can rot their tiny teeth. Drinks with added sugar are really bad news for baby teeth.
- Giving babies sugary things makes them more likely to pester for more.

- Too much sugar means excess energy, which can give babies a higher risk of becoming overweight or obese. This can lead to type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers in later life.

Offer water with meals instead of sugary drinks, and choose healthier snacks like fruit or toast, pitta or chapati fingers.

See if your baby is ready using the three steps below.

For further information

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2008/02/introducing-solid-foods.pdf>