

## Weaning your Breastfed Baby onto Solid Foods

### When to start trying solids

Babies develop at different rates - they are very individual and readiness to begin solids varies between babies. Try not to compare your baby with friends' babies in deciding when to start. This leaflet explains when and how to begin giving your breastfed baby foods other than breast milk.

### Breast milk for your baby's first six months

Breast milk is the only food and drinks your baby needs for at least his first six months. It has all the essential nutrients in just the right amounts and is a better food than anything else you could give him. Don't be tempted to start solids "because the baby now needs more iron". Studies have shown that the baby's iron reserves from birth, along with the well absorbed iron in breast milk, usually keep iron levels normal well into the baby's second six months (1).

As a general guide, babies are ready to start trying some solid foods at around six months, although some may prefer to leave it until later. Studies have also shown clear advantages to exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months of life and starting solid food earlier may compromise some of the protective properties of breast milk in areas such as allergy prevention. Where once families were looking for signs of readiness and looking to start when they could, perhaps even as early as four months, now families are delaying despite some signs of readiness with the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding in mind.

### Signs that your baby is ready to try solids

- Baby is around six months old.
- He can sit up unassisted.
- He has lost the tongue thrust reflex, which pushes things out of his mouth.
- He is able to pick up food and put it in his mouth and shows interest in food.
- He wants to chew and may have teeth.
- He is still hungry after a feed and demands feeds more often. (But increase breastfeeding for a few days first, as this might be a growth spurt and your baby may settle back to less frequent feeds again after your milk supply is increased).

### Early solids can lead to allergies and other problems

Beginning solids too early can cause problems for your baby. Some foods may cause allergic reactions if they are started before six months because your baby's digestive system isn't developed enough to digest the food properly. If your baby fills up on solid foods he will take less breast milk - missing out on the balance of nutrients and essential antibodies.

Research has shown that breastfed babies who start solids before six months are more likely to suffer a gastrointestinal infection than babies who are exclusively breastfed until 6 months (2). You may be tempted to give your baby solids to help him to "sleep through the night". Two studies found there was no difference in sleep patterns of babies given solids before bed and babies who were not given solids (3,4).

### Waiting for your baby to be ready has these advantages:

- Feeding is less messy. Your baby won't push food out of his mouth at you if you wait until his tongue thrust reflex has disappeared. He will also be able to co-ordinate swallowing mouthfuls of food.
- Your baby is less likely to suffer from food allergies.

- Preparing food is easier. Baby food can be mashed rather than pureed. Some families choose to skip the pureed/mashed stage entirely. Your baby may prefer to hold small pieces of food and feed himself. This is sometimes called '**baby led weaning**'. For more information on baby-led weaning go to [www.rapleyweaning.com](http://www.rapleyweaning.com)

### **Let baby lead the pace**

At around six months, if food is within his reach or he sits on your lap at lunchtime, your baby may well help himself. If he can pick it up, get it into his mouth and chew, he can have it!

Start by offering your baby a small amount of your chosen food (see below) after a breastfeed. If he is very hungry, he may get too frustrated to try something new, so take the edge off his appetite by breastfeeding him first. If he refuses the food (turning his head away, spitting the food out, or pushing the spoon away) don't try to coax him. Let him decide when he has had enough. To begin with, your baby will be finding out about different tastes and textures. He may want to play with the food. Almost all his calories will still come from breast milk.

As your baby shows more interest in solid foods you can increase the amounts - he will show you how much food he would like. Continue to breastfeed too as breast milk is still an essential part of your baby's diet. There is no need to prepare separate meals for him. Offer suitable foods (mashed if necessary) from your family's meal. Don't add salt to the meal during cooking - add it after you have taken out baby's portion. You can also begin offering drinks of water from a training cup at meal times. (But mineral water is generally not suitable because of the high sodium content.)

### **First foods to try:**

For your baby's first tastes of solid food, stick to healthy, fresh, low allergen foods such as:

- Apple or pear (pieces or stewed and pureed)
- Vegetables such as carrots, parsnip, sweet potato or potato (pieces or steamed and pureed)
- Banana, avocado, mango or other soft fruit in season.
- Gluten-free cereal.

Be sure to stay nearby while your baby feeds himself in case of choking. If you are nervous about the risk of choking, most areas offer first aid courses that could give you more confidence should a problem arise. A baby learning to eat may gag but this is not the same thing as choking, which is usually silent. There is no need to add salt to food (added salt could damage your baby's kidneys). Don't sweeten food by adding sugar - it isn't necessary and could encourage a sweet tooth.

### **Foods to avoid:**

Certain foods may trigger an allergic reaction in some babies, especially if they are started before six months of age. If you have a history of food allergies, asthma, eczema or hayfever in your family, you may prefer to avoid introducing these foods for even longer, perhaps not until your baby is 12 months old. Some babies who are prone to allergies will refuse all solids until they are 8 or 9 months old or even older.

### **Foods that are more likely to cause a reaction:**

- Foods that contain gluten, especially wheat-based foods - bread, pasta, breakfast cereals, biscuits.
- Dairy products.

- Eggs, especially egg whites - offer hard-boiled egg yolk only the first few times your baby has egg.
- Citrus fruits (including orange juice) and berries. Make sure that berries or grapes are cut in half so as not to present a possible choking problem.

**Some foods should be avoided for all babies under 12 months:**

- Honey - all babies should avoid honey as there is a risk of botulism poisoning which can be fatal.
- Fish and shellfish - all babies should avoid shellfish until they are 12 months old.
- Peanuts and other nuts and seeds - recommendations for children with a family history of allergy vary from waiting until 12 months to 7 years. Whole nuts are also a choking hazard.

For the latest information on foods to avoid ask your health visitor or visit the government Food Standards Agency website.

**Weaning from the breast**

Weaning onto solids doesn't mean the end of breastfeeding. Breast milk should remain a large part of your baby's diet until he is at least 12 months old and breastfeeding can continue long after your baby's first birthday. Breastfed toddlers have fewer illnesses than toddlers who are no longer breastfed (5). Your child will continue to get immunities through your breast milk. When he is ill, breastfeeding will be comforting for him and your milk may be the only thing he can keep down. Some of the benefits of breastfeeding (e.g. better dental health (6)) are linked with continuing breastfeeding past the age of one.

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