

## Introducing solids

As with all stages of being a parent, just when you think you've figured out one stage, you're onto the next! You may feel you've just mastered breastfeeding; you've begun to enjoy and feel comfortable with it and relish the ease of feeding your baby. Then, all of a sudden, your bubble is burst as people start asking about when you are going to introduce solids.

This can be an exciting time, but many parents feel anxious and confused about when and how to start introducing solids to their baby. There's conflicting guidance out there and new scientific evidence emerges all the time, so it's a complex area to navigate. With this leaflet we aim to simplify the topic and hope to give parents confidence to make the right decision for their families.

## When should I introduce solids?

The NHS recommends that your baby should be introduced to solids **around six months of age**. For full term healthy infants, breastmilk provides all the baby's nutritional needs for at least the first six months of life. So there is no rush.

Many parents are eager to start introducing solids, but we know that exclusively breastfeeding for six months has many advantages:

- Breastmilk contains all the fluid and nutrients the baby needs.
- Exclusively breastfeeding provides protection from gastrointestinal infections.
- Exclusively breastfeeding ensures a healthy milk supply.
- Exclusively breastfeeding provides a good contraceptive effect and can help weight loss.
- Breastfeeding can be much easier to do than giving solids; it takes less time, makes less mess and is cheaper!

**If your baby is breastfeeding more often, is spending longer at the breast, has become fussier or is waking more at night, know that these behaviours are very normal and are not signs that your baby is ready for solid food.**

By noticing and responding to your baby's feeding cues, your baby will receive all the milk he needs. The behaviours described above often occur at times of developmental leaps, when your baby is learning or has learnt new skills and is experiencing the world in a new way. He seeks comfort, security and nutrition at the breast, day and night, and this in no way links to his readiness to start solid foods.

However, just like crawling, walking and talking, readiness for solid foods won't occur at the exact same age for every child.

## How can I tell if my baby is ready for solid food?

There are three clear signs. If all are present this suggests that your baby is ready:

- 1** Baby can sit strongly (without being propped) and with good head control.
- 2** Baby can pick up food and bring it to his mouth confidently.
- 3** Baby can chew and swallow food. A baby who isn't ready will push the food back out of his mouth (tongue thrust reflex).

These signs rarely arise long before six months and introducing solids too early comes with real risks.

Introducing solids before four months of age can increase the risk of eczema, coeliac disease, type 1 diabetes, wheezing in childhood and increased body weight in childhood.

Some babies show interest in solid foods a little after six months. Although breastmilk will continue to provide the majority of a baby's nutritional needs for the first year, nutrients from solid foods (especially iron) become increasingly important towards 12 months of age.



Your baby needs time to learn how to interact with food, how to pick it up, chew it and swallow, what it smells like, how it feels and tastes – so introducing solids close to six months of age gives your baby time to build up these skills and allow him to ingest sufficient volumes of food to have a nutritionally complete diet as he approaches 12 months of age.

## Allergies

You may have heard reports of studies about the relationship between introducing solids and the probability of developing food allergies.

**At the moment, the NHS recommends that cow's milk, eggs, wheat, gluten, nuts, peanuts, peanut products, seeds, fish and shellfish should be introduced one at a time and not before six months.**

There are some studies emerging that may change this recommendation in the future, however this is a hugely complex area and one in which understanding is in its infancy.

The evidence emerging is not yet strong enough to change the guidance given by the NHS.

## How should I introduce my baby to solids?

Introducing solids aims to complement breastfeeding, not replace it. We would expect the intake of breastmilk to decrease gradually in line with the slow increase in the intake of solids. So there is no rush to get your baby eating a certain amount of food in his first year.

## Baby led weaning

Many parents find that allowing baby to feed himself is an easy, fun and effective way to introduce solids. Sometimes this is referred to as 'baby led weaning'. It describes the process of allowing a baby to explore food independently with his hands, feed himself and dictate how much and how quickly he eats.

For information, tips and support on baby led weaning, go to [www.babyledweaning.com](http://www.babyledweaning.com)

Many parents find spoonfeeding is an effective way to introduce solids. This approach can still very much be 'baby-led' by following your baby's cues about when he is ready for food, his pace of eating and never forcing food into his mouth. Offering finger foods alongside spoonfeeding can be a great way to transition your baby to feeding himself as well as developing his motor skills.

## First foods to try

Any food that is healthy, easy to pick up, cooked properly and is not a choking hazard is suitable as a first food. Some parents find lightly cooked, soft vegetables (e.g. carrots, sweet potato, and broccoli) and chopped fruit work well. However, well cooked meat or toast (from six months) is also suitable.

A common mistake is to chop food too small; it's best to keep food large enough to allow your baby to hold in his fist and have a good length sticking out to chew. If you are spoon-feeding, mashed foods can be made at home and offer more nutrition and better value for money than shop-bought baby food.

Only healthy foods should be offered to babies, none that are overly sugary or salty. Honey or honey-based foods should not be given before one year due to the risk of botulism. Any foods which increase the risk of choking should be avoided, for example, whole grapes, cherry tomatoes, popcorn, and whole nuts (until five years old).

If you're anxious about your baby choking, you might like to attend a first aid course. But remember that gagging (when your baby is learning to move food around inside his mouth) is not the same as choking, although we might find it difficult to watch!

In conclusion:

- **Solids should be introduced sometime around the six month mark when babies show the signs of readiness.**
- **There are real risks to introducing solids too early, especially before four months.**
- **Introducing common allergenic foods should be avoided until after six months.**

Talk to a health professional if you have any uncertainties or questions.

References and further reading:

- [www.firststepsnutrition.org](http://www.firststepsnutrition.org)
- [www.nhs.uk/start4life](http://www.nhs.uk/start4life)
- [www.babyledweaning.com](http://www.babyledweaning.com)

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## Weaning your breastfed baby onto solids



helpline: 0300 330 5453

[www.abm.me.uk](http://www.abm.me.uk)