

First foods to try

Any food that is healthy, easy to pick up 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. Well cooked meat or toast can also be suitable.

It's recommended 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 spoonfeeding, mashed foods made at home offer more nutrition and better value for money than shop-bought baby food. Many shop-bought products use high proportions of sweet foods and the label does not always accurately represent what the product contains.

High salt levels can be dangerous for babies. Honey, or foods containing honey as an ingredient, should not be given before one year due to the risk of botulism. Foods which are a choking risk should be avoided e.g. 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!

SACN says, 'From 6 months of age infants should be introduced to drinking from a non-valve freeflowing cup to enable children to learn the skill of sipping, which is important in the development of the muscles used for talking.' Babies should be offered water to drink but not juice or unmodified cow's milk.

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

Many parents choose spoonfeeding which can still 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.

In conclusion:

- Solids should be introduced sometime around the six month mark when babies show signs of readiness. This recommendation is based on the latest evidence and has recently been reaffirmed (2018).
- There are risks to introducing solids too early, especially before four months (17 weeks).
- Allergenic foods can be introduced from six months.
- Encourage your baby to enjoy exploring and experiencing food: its texture, colour and taste and to take part in family meal time. This can be a fun time for all of you.

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

References and further reading:

- www.firststepsnutrition.org
- www.nhs.uk/start4life

Association of Breastfeeding Mothers

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Starting your breastfed baby on solid food



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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! Starting solids can be an exciting time, but many parents feel anxious and confused about when and how to start introducing solids to their baby.

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

There are three clear signs. If all are present, and your baby is around 6 months old, this suggests that your baby might be 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).

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 become increasingly important towards 12 months of age. SACN says, 'From around 6 months of age, a diverse complementary diet is needed to meet the increasing iron requirements of older infants.'

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.

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. This is decided based on all the latest scientific evidence and was reaffirmed by the government's Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) in 2018: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/feeding-in-the-first-year-of-life-sacn-report>

We know that exclusively breastfeeding for six months has many advantages:

- Exclusively breastfeeding provides protection from a range of infections. SACN says, 'Breastfeeding has an important role in the development of the infant immune system through the provision of passive specific and non-specific immune factors.' Introducing solids before four months of age can increase the risk of infectious diseases.
- Exclusively breastfeeding ensures a healthy milk supply. SACN says, 'The available evidence indicates that the introduction of solid foods or infant formula before 6 months of age reduces the amount of breast milk consumed and is associated with greater risk of infectious illness in infants.'
- 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, it's important to know that these behaviours can be normal and this does not link to his readiness to start solid foods.

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. If you are worried about your baby's breastfeeding, seek breastfeeding support rather than move to the introduction of solid food as a potential solution.

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

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.

SACN says, 'there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the introduction of peanut or hen's egg into the infant diet before 6 months of age reduces the risk of developing food allergy' and 'The available evidence indicates that the deliberate exclusion or delayed introduction of peanut or hen's egg beyond 6 to 12 months of age may increase the risk of allergy to the same foods.'

How should I introduce my baby to solids?

Introducing solids aims to complement breastfeeding, not replace it. Your baby will naturally reduce their intake at the breast over time as you give them the experience of a wide range of foods and gradually increase from 1 meal a day to 3 meals, with snacks, by 12 months.