



Food in the first year of life

The first year of life is exciting and eventful for parents and babies, as dramatic changes in growth and eating patterns occur. Moving from breast or formula feeding exclusively to a diet including solid foods is important for a child's nutrition and development.

Growth in the first 12 months

Babies grow quickly in the first year of life, so they need plenty of energy and nutrients. Children's growth is not always steady and even, but can happen in spurts, which means that appetite and hunger can be unpredictable. The amount of food eaten by infants and their interest in food may be a little different from day to day—this is normal and shouldn't cause any concerns if your baby is growing well. Starting to eat solid foods is a learning experience for infants. It takes time and patience for a baby to eat in a regular pattern.

When does a baby need solid foods?

Breast milk or infant formula is important food for babies until at least 12 months of age, but it is essential that solid foods are introduced at the right time. At around six months of age, a baby's iron stores are low and extra foods are needed to prevent later nutritional problems such as iron deficiency.

Start to introduce solids at around six months of age. Babies are all different, some will be ready to have solids earlier than others—watch your baby for signs of readiness as a guide.

How can I tell when my baby is ready for solids?

At the same time that your baby needs more nutrients, there will be other obvious signs they are ready to try solids such as:

- watching others eat, and leaning forwards when food is around
- opening mouth when food is offered
- reaching out to grab food and spoons.

If a baby is not yet ready or interested in solids (or if they are full), when food is offered they may:

- push their tongue out
- close their mouth tightly and turn their head away
- cry
- push the spoon away.

If this happens at your first attempts to feed your baby, relax and try again in a few days.

While most children naturally spit food out when first given solids, they soon learn to accept food if you continue.

Getting to know when your baby is hungry or full, disinterested or tired is important to having happy, relaxed and enjoyable mealtimes.

What can happen if solids are started too early or too late?

Some parents want to try solids early, believing this may help baby grow, sleep or settle better. Giving solids rarely helps these problems and may lead to:

- a greater chance of developing food allergies
- poor growth if the solid food replaces breast milk or formula
- loose bowel actions or diarrhoea if baby cannot digest the food.

Offer hungry babies more breastmilk or formula feeds until they are ready for solids.

It is also important that starting solids is not left too late as this may lead to:

- poor growth due to low energy intake
- iron deficiency anaemia
- feeding problems, particularly if not started before about seven to nine months of age.



What is the best way to introduce food?

Food should be offered on a small infant sized spoon—it should never be placed in a feeding bottle. When introducing solids:

- be calm and relaxed when you start to feed your baby
- make sure your child is sitting comfortably and is not too hungry or distressed
- don't give up! If your baby refuses food the first time try again in a day or so
- introduce one new food at a time, trying it for several days before adding another
- babies often refuse new foods when first offered. It may take 5-10 tries before a new food is accepted
- stay with your baby when they are eating, and let them sit with the family to watch and learn
- your baby may only take a spoonful at first, but this will increase with time and practice
- be patient (and prepared!)—all babies will make a mess as they learn to eat.

What foods should I introduce first?

First foods can be prepared easily and cheaply at home. It is not necessary to add salt, sugar or other additives to your baby's food.

There are no hard and fast rules about what foods a baby should have and when.

- Start with a single food rather than a mixture. Infant rice cereal is recommended, as it is easy to digest, it is the correct consistency and is fortified with iron. Try half to one teaspoon after a breast or formula feed.
- Once rice cereal is going well try introducing fruits and vegetables.

- When your baby has commenced eating some fruits and vegetables try introducing meats, fish and chicken, and other cereals (breads, pasta, rice, whole-wheat cereal). Remember to wait several days between each new food.
- Try small amounts of cow's milk in custard, yoghurt and on cereal once your baby is eating meats or chicken.
- Introduce whole egg and smooth peanut butter after 10 months (wait until your baby is 12 months if there is a strong history of allergy in the family).
- Avoid small hard foods, such as nuts and uncooked vegetables, due to the risk of choking.
- Fruit juice, cordial and soft drinks are not recommended for infants.

When do I change the texture of food?

First solids should be finely mashed and smooth, but quickly grade up to coarsely mashed. Offer finger foods such as pieces of cooked vegetables and crusts at about seven months to encourage chewing and self-feeding.

Give your baby a small spoon to self feed, even while you continue to give most of the food. Encourage drinking from a cup from about six months of age. Ideally bottle feeds should be stopped from around 12 months.

When can I use cow's milk?

Pasteurised full fat cow's milk may be included in small amounts in custard, yoghurt or on cereal. However, milk should not be your child's main drink until after one year of age. Cow's milk is a poor source of iron and is never a substitute for breast milk or formula in babies under 12 months.

Reduced fat milks are not recommended in the first two years of life.

Important tips about including solids

- Continue breast milk or infant formula until at least one year of age.
- Start solid foods at around six months – watch for signs of readiness as a guide.
- There are no hard and fast rules about what foods a baby should have and when.
- Learn to recognise when your baby is interested in eating and when they are full.
- Be patient, foods may be spat out at first when learning to eat new textures.
- First foods need to be finely mashed and smooth, but quickly grade up textures.
- Encourage self feeding from around seven to eight months.
- Stay with your child while eating to avoid accidents such as choking.
- Mealtimes should be fun, relaxed and happy.
- Be a positive role model—children learn to eat by watching others.

For more information about child nutrition visit:
www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au