



Complementary feeding (weaning) your baby

This guidance is for parents and carers whose babies are ready to introduce solid foods into their diets alongside breast milk or formula feed.

What is weaning?

Weaning or complementary feeding, is the gradual process of introducing solid foods into your baby's diet alongside their regular breast milk or infant formula feeds. Every baby is an individual and they will make progress at their own pace. At first they may only take tiny amounts of pureed or soft foods but by age 1 year, most are managing regular family meals that have been mashed or chopped up for them. By this stage they will have naturally reduced their intake of breast milk or infant formula down to around 2 or 3 feeds daily.



When should weaning begin?

The Department of Health currently recommends that babies are exclusively breast fed until around 6 months (26 weeks) of age.

This will be suitable for the majority of babies as breast milk or infant formula will provide them with all the nutrition they need for their first 6 months. However, some parents may choose to begin weaning earlier than 6 months if they feel that their baby is ready (see below: 'Three signs your baby is ready for their first food').

There may also be medical reasons why your baby's doctor or dietitian advises you to start weaning earlier than 6 months – for example if your baby was born prematurely or needs additional support meeting their nutritional requirements.

Solids should NOT be introduced into a baby's diet before 17 weeks of age as their guts are simply not ready for solid food before this time.

Why is it important to start weaning at around age 6 months?

During the first year of life, babies grow more quickly than at any other time in their lives. By age 6 months they will start to need additional energy and essential nutrients such as iron from a variety of foods, as well as their regular breast or formula feeds. Learning how to eat is also an important developmental milestone for your baby. Biting, chewing and swallowing foods will help them to develop the muscles that are needed for speech.

Three signs your baby is ready for their first food

Your baby may be ready for weaning once they can:

- Support themselves in a sitting position without doubling over, and can hold their head stable;
- Co-ordinate their eyes, hands and mouth so that they can pick up food and put it to their mouths by themselves;

Compassionate

Aspirational

Resourceful

Excellent

- Swallow purees or small soft pieces of food – babies that are not yet ready will just push the food back out with their tongue.

Chewing fists, waking in the night more than usual or wanting extra milk feeds are normal baby behaviours and are NOT signs of readiness to start having solids.

Early stage weaning foods – at around 6 months (and not before 17 weeks of age)

If you introduce solids before 6 months of age, begin with smooth and runny pureed textures. Until now your baby will have only taken milk by sucking and they will need to develop the skills needed to move the puree around their mouth and swallow it.

First stage purees should be made from well cooked vegetables, potatoes, stewed fruits and powdered baby rice, mixed with breast milk or your baby's usual infant formula.

Do not reduce your baby's usual breast or formula feeding routine during the early stages of weaning.



Tips for getting started with weaning

- When first giving solids choose a time that suits both you and your baby – when you have some quiet, calm time and your baby is not too tired or too hungry;
- Always stay with your baby and supervise them when they are eating, in case of choking;
- Cool hot food down and test it to make sure it is only slightly warm before giving it to your baby;
- Feed your baby using a hard, plastic weaning spoon (not a metal one) and put it gently to your baby's lips starting with a small amount of puree.
- Wait for your baby to open their mouth before offering the spoon – if they are not yet ready for eating solids your baby will just push any food offered out with their tongue.
- Never force your baby to eat anything – if they are not interested or become distressed just stop and try again another time;
- Your baby may like to hold another spoon for themselves;
- Start by offering just a few teaspoons of food once a day – first foods are for tastes only and the quantity consumed is not important;
- Once your baby is able to take some food from a spoon you can start to offer a second meal each day and gradually increase the quantities. For younger babies this may take some weeks while babies aged 6 months often make progress quickly;
- Let your baby explore and enjoy foods by touching and holding them even if they do get a bit messy;
- Allow your baby to feed themselves using their fingers, as soon as they show an interest. Babies aged 6 months are likely to progress quite quickly from purees to mashed foods with soft lumps and also soft finger foods;

- Give your baby a variety of savoury flavours from start. Babies naturally prefer the sweeter tastes from fruits but savoury dishes will generally provide more energy and nutrients such as iron, so it is important that your baby develops a taste for them early on.

Weaning at around six months of age

Once your baby is established on these first stage foods, you can start to introduce a wider variety of foods spread over 3 meals daily. By 6 months your baby may be ready to move quickly on from smooth, runny purees to soft mashed foods that have a thicker consistency and some soft lumps and soft finger foods as well.



Allow your baby to feed themselves using their fingers as soon as they show an interest.

Baby led weaning with finger foods

- You may prefer to allow your baby to feed themselves at first with soft finger foods. This is known as baby-led weaning.
- You can also combine baby-led weaning with spoon-feeding;
- First finger foods should be soft and cut into pieces that are about the size of your finger so that your baby can hold the piece in their fist, with a bit poking out the end for them to bite off and chew on.
- Make sure that any finger foods are soft enough for your baby to chew. For example hard fruits or vegetables should be cooked first to soften them. Remove any pips, stones or hard skin and avoid small pieces or chunks of food that your baby could choke on;
- Ideal first finger foods include: soft cooked vegetables and stewed fruits such as parsnip, potato, yam, sweet potato, carrot, apple or pear and soft fruits such as ripe peach, melon, banana and avocado, which can be given as strips to hold and will break up easily in the mouth.
- Once confident with finger foods, your baby can be offered soft pieces of pasta, strips of cheese or hard-boiled egg, breadsticks or crackers and fingers of bread or toast – but watch out for bread sticking to the roof of your baby's mouth.
- Firmer finger foods can be offered from 9 to 12 months;
- Let your baby explore and enjoy foods by touching and holding them even if they do get a bit messy;

Foods to introduce from age 6 months

Your baby will now benefit from having more protein rich foods, fats and dairy products in their diet. From age 6 months, your baby can start to eat meals which include:

- Soft cooked or finely minced meats and chicken;
- Mashed or flaked cooked fish and seafood (check very carefully for any bones);
- Soft cooked lentils, beans and chickpeas or hummus;
- Eggs (can be soft cooked if British Lion stamped);

- Soft cooked rice, pasta or noodles;
- Breads, toast, pieces of chapatti;
- Oats, Weetabix and other cereals;
- Nuts or seeds that are ground down to a smooth powder, butter or paste (no whole or chopped nuts and seeds before age 5 years);
- Full-fat dairy products such as cheese, yoghurts, fromage frais, custard or rice pudding;
- Whole pasteurised cow's milk can be used in cooking or mixed with cereals;
- Fats such as butter, oils and oil based spreads.

Mealtimes from 9 to 12 months

Gradually, your baby will move toward a regular routine of having three meals a day, possibly with a small snack in between meals. Many foods will still need to be chopped up or mashed, but by now your baby should be having mostly the same meals as the rest of the family – but without any added salt, and they may not be ready for very spicy dishes yet.

Once weaning is well-established, you can offer both a savoury dish and a small dessert, such as fruit with yoghurt or custard at lunch and dinner time.

Now is the time to expand the variety of foods in your baby's diet to expose them to as wide a variety of tastes and flavours as possible.



Current advice about food allergies

Many parents are concerned about the risk of food allergies for their baby. The foods most commonly associated with allergies include: **peanuts and other nuts; eggs, cow's milk and dairy products, fish, seafood, sesame and other seeds, soya and wheat.**

However, there is now good evidence to show that introducing these foods into the weaning diet from the age of 6 months **does not** increase the risk of allergy or auto-immune conditions such as coeliac disease and may even be protective.

Indeed, the available evidence indicates that delaying the introduction of peanuts and eggs beyond 1 year of age, may increase the risk of becoming allergic to those foods in the future. Currently, the best advice is that if any of these potentially allergenic foods form part of your family's regular diet then then it is recommended that you introduce them into your baby's diet one at a time, between the ages of 6 months and 1 year.

The guidelines recommend giving just small amounts of these foods at first and if there are no signs of any allergic reaction, continue to give them to your baby regularly. The signs of an allergic reaction can include a runny nose or watery, itchy eyes, red, itchy skin, wheezing or coughing or a worsening of any eczema or asthma symptoms. Most allergy symptoms are mild but In rare cases a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis can occur and this requires emergency medical treatment.

If your baby already has a known allergy, a history of eczema in early life or you have concerns that they are at high risk of developing food allergies – discuss the introduction of potentially allergenic foods into their diet with your baby's specialist doctor or dietitian.

Important food safety information for weaning babies

- Ensure that all poultry, meats, fish and shellfish are thoroughly cooked;
- Eggs with the British Lion stamp can be given soft cooked from age 6 months; eggs which are not Lion stamped must be hard boiled until both the yolk and white are solid;
- Nuts and seeds are a choking risk and must never be given whole or coarsely chopped to children under 5 years. You can use smooth nut butters or nuts that have been finely ground to a powder or seed pastes such as tahini which is added to hummus;
- Other choking hazards include small pieces of hard foods such uncooked apple or carrot, foods that contain bones or small round foods such as grapes and cherry tomatoes – cut these foods up in to smaller pieces and peel the skins from fruits, vegetables and sausages before giving them to your baby;
- Use only pasteurised milk, cheeses and dairy products;
- Liver and liver products such as pâté should not be given more than once a week because of their very high Vitamin A content;
- Oily fish such as salmon, fresh tuna and mackerel are nutritious for babies but do not give more than 2 servings a week because of possible contaminants.

Foods that should be avoided in the weaning diet

- **Salt:** this should not be added to your baby's foods and salty foods such as crisps, bacon, cheese and stock cubes or gravy powder should be limited;
- **Honey:** should not be given to children aged under 1 year due to the risk that it could contain harmful botulin bacteria;
- **Added Sugar:** avoid food and drinks that are high in sugar and don't add sugar to your baby's foods and drinks;

Vegetarian and Vegan diets

Babies can be weaned onto vegetarian or vegan diets but you may need to take additional care to ensure their nutritional needs are met. Vegan babies will require a regular source of vitamin B12 as this cannot be provided by an entirely plant based diet and plant based milk alternatives are not suitable as a main drink until after age 1 year. Speak to your Health Visitor or Dietitian for further advice.

Milk feeds and other drinks from 6 months to 1 year

Your baby should continue to have breast or formula milk feeds as their main drink until they are at least a year old and breastfeeding can continue for as long as both mum and baby wish. Once your baby starts to take more solids and has a regular mealtime routine, they will naturally start to reduce their intake of breast milk or formula. By age 9 to 12 months they may only be having 2 or 3 breast or formula feeds a day, generally in the morning and evening.

Cow's milk (and plant based milk alternatives) are not suitable as a main drink for your baby until they are a year old.

Water is the best drink to offer in addition to breast or formula milk as it is safest for your baby's teeth. After age 6 months, tap water does not need to be boiled and cooled first. Mineral waters are not suitable for babies.

Fruit juice is not recommended for children under age 1 year due to the sugar content and acidity. Do not give your baby tea, coffee or any other caffeinated drinks.

Cups: Introduce a cup from around age six months and offer your baby sips of water with meals and throughout the day. Using an open cup or a free-flow cup without a valve will help your baby learn to sip and is better for your baby's teeth.

A balanced diet for your 1-year old will include:

- Three to four servings each day of starchy foods such as cereals, bread, potatoes, pasta or rice;
- Three to four servings a day of vegetables and fruits;
- Two servings a day of a high protein food such as meat, fish, eggs, dhal or other pulses (chickpeas, beans and lentils), smooth or finely ground nuts, Quorn, tofu and other vegetarian protein sources
- Three servings a day of dairy foods such as milk, yoghurt or cheese (or plant based alternatives that are fortified with calcium);
- Breast milk feeds or infant formula up to 600ml (20floz) – either as a drink or mixed with cereals and other foods. Formula milk can be replaced with pasteurised whole cow's milk after age 1 year.

Are vitamin supplements needed?

The Department of Health recommends that all children aged 6 months to 5 years are given a supplement containing vitamins A, C and D each day. Vitamin drops suitable for babies and toddlers normally combine vitamins A, C and D in the correct amounts.

Babies who are being breast fed should be given a vitamin D supplement containing 8.5 to 10 micrograms of Vitamin D from birth to one year of age, even if their mothers are also taking supplements. This is to protect babies' bone health because it can be difficult to get enough vitamin D from foods alone. The main source of vitamin D is sunlight but babies' skin needs to be protected from the sun.

Babies who are consuming at least 500mls (17floz) of formula each day do not require additional vitamin supplements because infant formula is fortified with vitamins A, C, D and other vitamins and minerals. You can ask your GP, health visitor, dietitian or pharmacist for further advice on infant vitamins

Healthy Start

You may be entitled to free vitamin drops if you qualify for Healthy Start - <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/> . Parents should also check if they are eligible for Healthy Start vouchers to use towards milk, fruits and vegetables.

Summary

Weaning is the process of learning to eat solid foods at around 6 months of age and is a key developmental stage for your baby. To help ensure they meet their full potential for growth and development in their crucial first year and beyond, it is important not to delay the start of weaning beyond 6 months. This can also be an enjoyable time for babies exploring a new world of flavours, tastes and textures and by introducing your baby to a wide a range of new foods before their first birthday you can help to set them on the right track for a healthy diet throughout life.



Sources of reference

Shaw, Vanessa et al; *Clinical Paediatric Dietetics*. (5th Edition). Wiley Professional, Reference & Trade (Wiley K&L), 2020.

British Dietetic Association (BDA); July 2020: Food Fact Sheet: Complementary feeding (weaning)

NHS Start for Life – How to Start Weaning your Baby; <https://www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/baby/weaning/how-to-start-weaning-your-baby/>

NHS Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/food-allergies-in-babies-and-young-children/> (Nov, 21)

NHS Get help to buy food and milk – Healthy Start. <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/>

NHS Vitamins for Children - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/weaning-and-feeding/vitamins-for-children/> (May 2024)

Contacting us

If you have any queries, please contact the Paediatric Dietitians on 0118 322 7116.

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Weaning your baby: additional information

High calorie weaning advice for infants under 1 year who need additional support with weight gain and growth

When is a high calorie weaning diet advised?

There may be times when babies grow more slowly than expected or even lose some weight and this is known as **faltering growth**.

There can be many complex reasons why a baby's growth falters, including:

- **Reduced feeding:** Some babies cannot manage enough breast milk, infant formula or solid foods to meet their needs due to reasons such as pre-maturity, severe reflux, developmental delay or physical feeding difficulties, such as cleft palate;
- **Reduced appetite or willingness to feed:** Problems such as constipation, colic or reflux can reduce appetite and some infants can start refusing feeds after negative experiences such as sore throats, vomiting bugs or a choking episode;
- **Higher than usual energy needs:** Medical conditions such as heart problems, surgery, metabolic disorders or frequent periods of illness can mean that some babies require more calories than is usual.

It can be very worrying for parents when there are concerns about their baby's weight gain, but your paediatric dietitian will be able to provide nutritional support advice that is tailored to the individual needs of your baby.

High calorie weaning tips to help your baby gain weight and grow

If your baby is only managing small amounts of their weaning solids then there are ways to maximise the calorie content of their meals and snacks.

From 17 weeks to 6 months:

Your paediatric dietitian may recommend high calorie supplements that can be added to expressed breast milk, infant formula or pureed foods to fortify them. A specialist high-energy infant formula milk may also be prescribed for your baby to replace regular infant formula (if using) or it can be added to purees and cereals as part of their weaning diet.

- First stage purees are generally vegetable and fruit based but they can be enriched with added breast or infant formula milk as well as powdered baby rice;
- If a specialist high calorie baby milk has been prescribed for your baby, use this to enrich pureed vegetables and baby cereals;

At around age 6 months and beyond:

The calorie content of your baby's weaning diet can also be boosted with the addition of foods that are high in fat as this is the richest source of energy:

- Start to add ½ to 1 teaspoon of butter, oil, cream or cream cheese to a 2 tablespoon serving of mashed potato or vegetable puree. This can be added to either home-made purees or jars of baby food;
- A teaspoon of grated cheese will also add calories to cooked meals but cheese can be very salty so use only small amounts in the early stages;
- Add 1 to 2 tablespoons of cream or custard to a serving of fruit puree or stewed fruits;
- Use high calorie formula (if prescribed) or full cream (Channel Island) milk to make up cereals and use this in cooking where possible – for example making mashed potato, white or cheese sauce or rice pudding;
- If your baby is not having breast or formula milk after age 1 year, give them full cream (blue top milk) as their main drink up to age 2 years because of the additional energy and vitamin content;
- Choose full cream dairy products (yoghurts and cheeses) not the reduced fat or diet versions;
- Once your baby is established on regular meals, start to add in a dessert course at lunch and dinner time – nutritious dessert ideas you could try:
 - ✓ To your baby's fruit add 1-2 tablespoons of double cream or custard.
 - ✓ Rice pudding
 - ✓ Fruit puree or mashed and custard,
 - ✓ Full fat yogurt or fromage fraise
 - ✓ Fingers of fruit or slices to dip into custard or yoghurt.
 - ✓ Crème caramel or other dairy desserts
- Cook meats, fish or lentils with added butter or oil instead of baking or grilling them;
- Use high calorie (not low fat) spreads and dips with breads and crackers – for example butter or spreads cream cheese, mashed avocado, humus, melted cheese or smooth nut butter;
- Include vegetables with the majority of meals but add a little melted butter, oil or crème fraîche to boost calories and aid the absorption of certain vitamins.

If your baby has a small appetite, try to avoid giving them drinks just before or during meals as this can fill them up. It can also help to give them a small snack as a top up between meals – but stick to a regular snack time rather than letting them graze throughout the day so that they develop some appetite for their main meals.

Ideas for high calorie but small snacks include:

- One or 2 fingers of toast, pitta, mini rice cakes or crackers spread with butter, cream cheese, hummus, mashed avocado or smooth peanut butter;
- Small strips of mild cheese (or a tablespoon grated) with cut up grapes, cherry tomatoes or cucumber batons;
- About half a ripe banana;
- One or 2 mini shortbread bites, plain fairy cakes or madeleines;
- Small pieces of enriched breads such as croissant, brioche or Scotch pancake – can also be buttered.



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Shaw, Vanessa et al; *Clinical Paediatric Dietetics*. (5th Edition). Wiley Professional, Reference & Trade (Wiley K&L), 2020.

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