

Weaning your baby

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.

Some parents may choose to begin weaning earlier than 6 months if they feel that their baby is ready. The earliest time that solids could be introduced into a baby's diet is 17 weeks of age as their guts are simply not ready for solid food before this time, but 26 weeks is the recommended time for most babies. However, there may 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.

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 able to 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;

- 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 or wanting extra milk feeds are normal baby behaviours and are not signs of readiness to start having solids.

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;
- Never force your baby to eat anything – if they are not interested or become distressed just stop and try again another time;
- 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, so it is important that your baby develops a taste for them early on.

Early stage weaning foods from 17 weeks to around 6 months of age

If you choose or are advised to 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.



Home-made purees, made from simple ingredients, will always provide the best flavours and nutrients for your baby and will be cheaper than commercial baby foods.

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

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 2 or 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.



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 rice, pasta or noodles;
- Breads, toast, pieces of chapatti;
- Oats, Weetabix and other cereals;
- Soft cooked lentils, beans and chickpeas or hummus;
- Eggs (can be soft cooked if British Lion stamped);
- 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.

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 in particular 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 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.

However, 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 well cooked or hard boiled;
- 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 pate 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;
- Sugar: don’t add sugar to your baby’s foods or drinks and avoid sugary foods such as sweets and chocolates;
- Drinks with added sugar or artificial sweeteners: including regular or diet fizzy drinks and regular or no added sugar squashes.

First finger foods

Your baby may enjoy trying soft finger foods that they can hold and feed themselves. Finger foods help your baby learn how to bite and chew – they should be cut into strips about the length of your own finger so that they are big enough for your baby to hold in their fist, with some sticking out of the top.

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.



Milk feeds and other drinks from 6 months to 1 year

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

Cow's milk is 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.

Well-diluted fruit juice (1 part juice to 10 parts water) should only be given alongside meals as this will reduce the effects of acid on your baby's teeth.

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.

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. 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 teatime.

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.



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;
- Three servings a day of dairy foods such as milk, yoghurt or cheese;
- 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 babies, including those who are exclusively breast fed, are given a daily supplement containing 8.5 to 10 micrograms of Vitamin D to protect their bone health. Vitamin D supplements should be continued until at least 5 years of age.

Infant formulas are fortified with added Vitamin D. so additional supplements are not required for formula fed babies unless they are consuming less than 500mls (17floz) of formula each day.

Vitamin drops suitable for babies and toddlers normally combine vitamins A, C and D. You can ask your GP, health visitor or dietitian where to get vitamin drops or ask your pharmacist for advice.

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

Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN): 2018: clinical guideline; Feeding in the First Year of Life

British Dietetic Association (BDA); 2016: Food Fact Sheet: Complementary feeding (weaning)

British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology (BSACI) 2018: clinical guideline: Preventing Food Allergy in Your Baby

NHS Start4Life: 2015 leaflet: Introducing Solid Foods – giving your baby a better start in life

NHS Choices website: 2018: Your baby's first solid foods:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/solid-foods-weaning/>

Contact us

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

More information is available on the Trust website www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Produced by the RBH Paediatric Dietitians, August 2018. Review due: August 2020

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 and 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 which 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 teatime – choose full cream yoghurts, fruit with cream or custard, mousses or rice puddings;
- 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 fraiche 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.

