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Introducing Solid Foods To Babies

This NebGuide explains when and how to add solid foods to your baby's diet.

Darlene Martin, Extension Nutrition Specialist

- [When to Start Solid Foods](#)
- [Feed Your Baby Like a Baby](#)
- [Cereals -- the First Food](#)
- [Vegetables, Fruits and Meats](#)
- [Appetite](#)
- [First Finger Foods](#)
- [Home Prepared Baby Food](#)
- [Heating Baby Food](#)
- [Summary](#)
- [Resources](#)

Good nutrition is the cornerstone of a baby's growth and development. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends breast-feeding for most full-term infants. No formula can replace the immunological protection a baby receives from colostrum -- the breast milk produced the first few days after birth. It's important to breast-feed for at least the first few weeks, even if it can't be continued for a long time. If breast-feeding is not your choice, or if it is discontinued before the baby's first birthday, commercially prepared infant formula is the best alternative.

Breast milk or an appropriate fortified formula are the only fluids your baby needs for the first four to six months and should remain the core of the diet throughout the first year. Formula-fed babies also may need plain water. What you feed your baby in the first year of life is very important because this is when your baby grows most rapidly.

When to Start Solid Foods

The time to start semisolid or solid foods depends on your baby's development. The baby's digestive system or immature kidneys may not be ready for solid foods before four to six months of age. Food allergies and choking can cause problems when feeding solids too early. Check with your doctor before beginning to feed solid foods.

Following are some signs of physical readiness for feeding solid foods.

- Your baby can sit up with support and can control his or her head.
- Your baby can control upper body movements and pull forward when food is wanted or move back when full.
- Your baby's tongue doesn't keep pushing food out.

Feed Your Baby Like a Baby

Use a very small spoon to feed solid foods. Spoons designed for babies are available at most grocery or department stores. Never use a bottle or infant-feeder for semisolid or solid foods because they can increase the possibility of choking or overfeeding.

Introduce only one food at a time. Wait a week before introducing another food and always watch to see if the baby has any reaction such as vomiting, diarrhea, wheezing, or a skin rash. If you feed only one new food at a time and there is no reaction, you can continue feeding that food without concern about possible allergies.

If your baby doesn't want to eat a new food, don't force the issue. Offer it again the next day. If the food is still refused, wait two or three weeks before offering it again.

Cereals -- the First Food

Dry packed iron-fortified baby cereals mixed with breast milk, formula, or water are usually the first solid foods given to infants because they meet the baby's iron requirements. Start with rice cereal since it is least likely to cause an allergic reaction. After successfully feeding rice cereal for a week, introduce another infant cereal such as oat or barley cereal. Dry-mix baby cereals contain more usable iron than pre-mixed cereals in a jar, especially those mixed with fruit. To mix baby's first cereal, use one teaspoon dry cereal with two tablespoons of breast milk, formula or water. The mixture should be very thin. As your baby is able to accept more food mix dual parts of liquid to dry cereal. Do not use raw or pasteurized cow's milk to mix cereal. Cow's milk is difficult for a baby's system to digest until after one year of age.

At first give only a small amount of cereal -- about one teaspoon twice a day. Gradually increase it to two to three tablespoons twice a day. Remember, your baby's appetite for food will be small at first. Learn your baby's signals for fullness such as starting to play, blowing bubbles, pushing the spoon away or turning the head. Respect your baby's signals for being full.

Vegetables, Fruits and Meats

Introduce strained vegetables and fruits after the baby is comfortable with eating cereal. Introduce one vegetable or fruit at a time. Watch for reactions that may indicate food sensitivity. Begin by adding mild-flavored vegetables such as carrots, yellow squash, sweet potatoes, green beans and then add peaches, applesauce and pears. After your baby accepts several kinds of vegetables offer two varieties each day for added nutrition. Beets, spinach and collard and turnip greens have nitrates and should be introduced after one year of age. Vegetables usually are introduced first because starting with the sweet taste of fruits may make some vegetables less appealing.

Offer strained, lean meats after your baby fully accepts vegetables and fruits. As with cereals, vegetables and fruits offer a single meat at a time. Meat dinners are not recommended because they have less protein than single ingredient foods such as strained meats or vegetables. Introduce cooked egg yolks after meats have been accepted. Egg whites may cause a food reaction and should not be introduced

until after baby's first birthday.

Appetite

During the first year, the main source of nutrition should be breast milk or formula. The baby should continue to have five to six breast-feedings or 24 to 40 ounces of formula in 24 hours. If milk consumption drops below 24 ounces or your baby does not want to nurse, you may be feeding too much solid food. Your baby's appetite will vary from feeding to feeding -- don't force your baby to drink every drop or eat an extra spoonful. If you feel your baby is not eating enough, consult your doctor or dietitian.

First Finger Foods

At six to seven months babies usually enjoy finger foods. Acceptable finger foods include hard toast, melba toast, crackers, zwieback and cooked vegetables and fruits. Be alert to possible choking.

Home Prepared Baby Food

Even though manufacturers of infant foods no longer add salt or sugar to most products, many parents prefer to make their own baby food with a food processor, blender, strainer, masher, or grinder. If you make your own baby food, remember:

- Follow clean, sanitary procedures in all preparation and storage techniques.
- Fresh or frozen foods can be used.
- The best cooking method for baby food is steaming rather than boiling, and broiling rather than frying. Microwave cooking is a good preparation method, especially for vegetables, because foods can be cooked in very little water.
- Do not add salt.
- If you add sugar, do so sparingly. Do not use honey in any form during your baby's first year because it may contain clostridium botulinum spores. These may make your baby very ill, but may not make an adult ill.
- Mash or puree clean, washed, and peeled soft raw fresh fruit such as bananas, pears, strawberries, or melons.
- Homecooked baby food may be immediately frozen or stored in covered containers in the refrigerator for one to two days. One way to freeze baby food is to pour pureed food into ice cube trays and freeze. When food is firmly frozen, remove the cubes and store in plastic bags or containers in the freezer for no more than two months. If you buy commercially prepared food, remember that combination foods such as dinners and desserts often have added starch and are more expensive and less nutritious than individual foods. Read labels to know what prepared foods contain.

Heating Baby Food

Baby food may be served cold, at room temperature, or heated. There are three ways to heat baby food. An electric baby dish may be used. The electric dish keeps the food at constant temperature, but food should always be stirred and tested for temperature before feeding to the baby. Food can be heated in a small heat-resistant dish placed in a saucepan with about 1 inch of water. Do not heat baby food in baby food jars. They are not heat resistant and can crack or break when heated. After dishes are placed in saucepan, heat water to simmering, not boiling. When food is warm, remove, stir and test for temperature. A microwave oven may be used for warming baby food. Stir food thoroughly because hot spots can be created. Food may feel cool to the touch, but be hot in the middle. Always test food by

placing some on your wrist or by tasting the food. Use your own spoon for tasting, never use the baby's spoon.

Never reuse leftover food. It contains bacteria from the baby's mouth that will continue to grow. Food stored in the refrigerator for more than three days should not be fed to your baby.

Warning

The size, shape, and consistency of the following foods can cause choking and should not be used until your baby is older:

- berries, grapes, cherries, and raw vegetables such as peas and carrots
- nuts, raisins, adult dry cereals, whole kernel corn, hot dogs, chips, pretzels, and popcorn

Summary

For a successful beginning:

- Use a small spoon and feed from a dish.
- Throw away leftover food not eaten.
- Do not use the baby's spoon for tasting.
- Always refrigerate an opened jar of food immediately.
- Discard baby food that is left in the refrigerator more than three days.
- Introduce one new food at a time. Wait a week before offering another new food.
- Do not add salt, sugar or other seasonings to food.
- Offer a variety of foods.
- Never leave a baby unattended during meal time.
- Remember that breast milk or formula is still the main source of nutrition during the first year.
- Respect baby's signals for being full.
- Smile when you give your baby a spoonful of food.

Resources

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