

Starting Solid Foods



Until now, your baby's diet has been made up of breast milk and/or formula. But once your baby reaches 4 to 6 months of age, you can begin adding solid foods. Read on to learn more about introducing solid foods.

When can my baby eat solid foods?

Most babies are ready to eat solid foods at 4 to 6 months of age. Before this age instead of swallowing the food, they push their tongues against the spoon or the food. This tongue-pushing reflex is necessary when they are breastfeeding or drinking from a bottle. Most babies stop doing this at about 4 months of age. Energy needs of babies begin to increase around this age as well, making this a good time to introduce solids.

You may start solid foods with any feeding. Try scheduling feedings during family meals. Or if your baby is easily distracted, you may want to pick a quiet time when you can focus on feeding your baby. However, keep in mind that as your child gets older, she will want to eat with the rest of the family.

Feeding your baby solid foods

To prevent choking, make sure your baby is sitting up when you introduce solid foods. If your baby cries or turns away when you give him the food, do not force the issue. It is more important that you both enjoy mealtimes than for your baby to start solids by a specific date. Go back to nursing or bottle-feeding exclusively for a time before trying again. Remember that starting solid foods is a gradual process and at first your baby will still be getting most of his nutrition from breast milk and/or formula.

It is important for your baby to get used to the process of eating—sitting up, taking bites from a spoon, resting between bites, and stopping when full. Always use a spoon to feed your baby solid foods. These early experiences will help your child learn good eating habits throughout life.

Some parents try putting baby cereal in a bottle. This is not a good idea. Feeding your baby this way can cause choking. It also may increase the amount of food your baby eats and can cause your baby to gain too much weight. However, cereal in a bottle may be recommended if your baby has reflux. Check with your child's doctor.

How to start

Start with half a spoonful or less and talk to your baby through the process ("Mmm, see how good this is!"). Your baby may not know what to do at first. She may look confused, wrinkle her nose, roll the food around her mouth, or reject it altogether. This is a normal early reaction to solid foods.

One way to make eating solids for the first time easier is to give your baby a little breast milk and/or formula first, then switch to very small half-spoonfuls of food, and finish with more breast milk and/or formula. This will prevent your baby from getting frustrated when she is very hungry.

Do not be surprised if most of the first few solid-food feedings wind up on your baby's face, hands, and bib. Increase the amount of food gradually, with just a teaspoonful or two to start. This allows your baby time to learn how to swallow solids.

What kinds of foods should my baby eat?

For most babies it does not matter what the first solid foods are. By tradition, single-grain cereals are usually introduced first. However, there is no medical evidence that introducing solid foods in any particular order has an advantage for your baby. Though many pediatricians will recommend starting vegetables before fruits, there is no evidence that your baby will develop a dislike for vegetables if fruit is given first. Babies are born with a preference for sweets, and the order of introducing foods does not change this. If your baby has been mostly breastfeeding, he may benefit from baby meat, which contains more easily absorbed sources of iron and zinc that are needed by 4 to 6 months of age. Please discuss this with your child's doctor.

Baby cereals are available premixed in individual containers or dry, to which you can add breast milk, formula, or water. Premixed baby cereals are convenient, while dry cereals are richer in iron and allow you to control the thickness of the cereal. Whichever type of cereal you use, make sure that it is made for babies because these cereals contain extra nutrients your baby needs at this age.

Using a high chair

The following are safety tips when using a high chair:

- Make sure the high chair you use cannot be tipped over easily.
- If the chair folds, be sure it is locked each time you set it up.
- Whenever your child sits in the chair, use the safety straps, including the crotch strap. This will prevent your child from slipping down, which could cause serious injury or even death. Never allow your child to stand in the high chair.
- Do not place the high chair near a counter or table. Your child may be able to push hard enough against these surfaces to tip the chair over.
- Never leave a young child alone in a high chair and do not allow older children to climb or play on it because this could also tip it over.
- A high chair that hooks on to a table is not a good substitute for a freestanding one. If you plan to use this type of chair when you eat out or when you travel, look for one that locks on to the table. Be sure the table is heavy enough to support your child's weight without tipping. Also, check to see whether your child's feet can touch a table support. If your child pushes against the table, it may dislodge the seat.

Once your baby learns to eat one food, gradually give him other foods. Generally, meats and vegetables contain more nutrients per serving than fruits or cereals.

Many pediatricians recommend against giving eggs and fish in the first year of life because of allergic reactions, but there is no evidence that introducing these nutrient-dense foods after 4 to 6 months of age determines whether your baby will be allergic to them. Give your baby one new food at a time, and wait at least 2 to 3 days before starting another. After each new food, watch for any allergic reactions such as diarrhea, rash, or vomiting. If any of these occur, stop using the new food and consult with your child's doctor.

Within a few months of starting solid foods, your baby's daily diet should include a variety of foods each day that may include the following:

- Breast milk and/or formula
- Meats
- Cereal
- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Eggs and fish

Finger foods

Once your baby can sit up and bring her hands or other objects to her mouth, you can give her finger foods to help her learn to feed herself. To avoid choking, make sure anything you give your child is soft, easy to swallow, and cut into small pieces. Some examples include small pieces of banana, wafer-type cookies, or crackers; scrambled eggs; well-cooked pasta; well-cooked chicken finely chopped; and well-cooked and cut up yellow squash, peas, and potatoes. Do not give your baby any food that requires chewing at this age. (See "Choking hazards.")

At each of your child's daily meals, she should be eating about 4 ounces, or the amount in one small jar of strained baby food. Limit giving your child foods that are made for adults. These foods often contain more salt and other preservatives.

If you want to give your baby fresh food, use a blender or food processor, or just mash softer foods with a fork. All fresh foods should be cooked with no added salt or seasoning. Though you can feed your baby raw bananas (mashed), most other fruits and vegetables should be cooked until they are soft. Refrigerate any food you do not use, and look for any signs of spoilage before giving it to your baby. Fresh foods are not bacteria-free, so they will spoil more quickly than food from a can or jar.

Warning: Do not feed your baby home-prepared beets, turnips, carrots, spinach, or collard greens in the first year of life.

In some parts of the country, these vegetables have large amounts of nitrates, chemicals that can cause an unusual type of anemia (low blood count) in young babies. Baby food companies are aware of this problem and screen the produce they buy for nitrates. They also avoid buying these vegetables in parts of the country where nitrates have been found. Thus it is safer to use commercially prepared forms of these foods during the first year of life.

What changes can I expect after my baby starts solids?

When your child starts eating solid foods, his stools will become more solid and variable in color. Due to the added sugars and fats, they will have a much stronger odor too. Peas and other green vegetables may turn the stool a deep-green color; beets may make it red. (Beets sometimes make urine red as well.) If your baby's meals are not strained, his stools may contain undigested pieces of food, especially hulls of peas or corn, and the skin of tomatoes or other vegetables. All of this is normal. Your child's digestive system is still immature and needs time before it can fully process these new foods. If the stools are extremely loose, watery, or full of mucus, however, it may mean the digestive tract is irritated. In this case, reduce the amount of solids and introduce them more slowly. If the stools continue to be loose, watery, or full of mucus, consult your child's doctor to see if your child has a digestive problem.

Should I give my baby juice?

Babies do not need juice. Babies younger than 6 months should not be given juice. However, if you choose to give your baby juice, do so only after 6 months of age and offer it only in a cup, not in a bottle. To help prevent tooth decay, do not put your child to bed with a bottle. If you do, make sure it contains only water.

Limit juice intake to no more than 4 ounces a day and offer it only with a meal or snack. Any more than this will reduce her appetite for other, more nutritious foods, including breast milk and/or formula. Too much juice also can cause diaper rash, diarrhea, or excessive weight gain.

Give your child extra water if she seems to be thirsty between feedings. During the hot months when your child is losing fluid through sweat, offer water 2 or more times a day. If you live in an area where the water is fluoridated, these feedings also will help prevent future tooth decay.

Good eating habits start early

Babies and small children do not know what foods they need to eat. Your job as a parent is to offer a good variety of healthy foods that are rich in the nutrients that they need. Watch your child for cues that she has had enough to eat. Do not overfeed!

Choking hazards

Do not feed children younger than 4 years round, firm foods unless they are chopped completely. Round, firm foods are common choking dangers. When infants and young children do not grind or chew their food well, they may try to swallow it whole. The following foods can be choking hazards:

- Hot dogs (including meat sticks [baby food "hot dogs"])
- Nuts and seeds
- Chunks of meat or cheese
- Whole grapes
- Popcorn
- Chunks of peanut butter
- Raw vegetables
- Fruit chunks, such as apple chunks
- Hard, gooey, or sticky candy
- Chewing gum

Begin to build good eating habits. Usually eating 5 to 6 times a day (3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks) is a good way to meet toddlers' energy needs. Children who "graze," or eat constantly, may never really feel hungry. They can have problems from eating too much or too little.

If you are concerned that your baby is overweight or becoming overweight, talk with your child's doctor before making any changes to his diet. During these months of rapid growth, your baby needs a balanced diet that includes fat, carbohydrates, and protein. Continue to give breast milk and/or formula for the first year. After 1 year of age, if you have a family history of obesity, cardiovascular disease, or high cholesterol, your child's doctor may suggest using reduced fat milk. After 1 year of age you may also reduce the amount of food your child eats at each meal. However, it is important that he continue to get the balanced diet he needs. Talk with your child's doctor about this. Your child's doctor will help you determine if your child is eating too much, not eating enough, or eating too much of the wrong kinds of foods.

Because prepared baby foods have no added salt, they are not a source of added salt. However, as your baby eats more and more "table foods," he will imitate the way you eat, including using salt and nibbling on salty snacks. For your child's sake as well as your own, eat a healthy diet yourself and decrease your intake of fat and salty snack foods. Provide a good role model by eating a variety of healthy, nutrient-rich foods.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

