

Introducing Complementary Foods to your breastfed baby



According to recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and the American Public Health Association (APHA), human milk is the only food that healthy, full-term babies need for about the first six months of life. The composition of human milk changes in response to a variety of cues, so that each mother provides milk that meets her own baby's unique needs. Human milk provides immunity factors for as long as the baby nurses, and many of the health benefits of breastfeeding continue well into childhood and beyond.

Signs of Readiness

As your baby will signal that he is ready to nurse or is feeling full, he will also signal his readiness for ingesting complementary foods. Indications include:

- Baby is about six months old.
- Baby is able to sit, unsupported.
- Baby has lost his tongue-thrust reflex, meaning that he does not push foods out of his mouth with his tongue when they are offered.
- Baby can pick things up between his finger and thumb.

The Benefits of Waiting Until You See the Signs

Most solid foods are lower in calories than human milk, of lower nutritional value, and can be difficult for young babies to digest. Many foods can cause unpleasant reactions and even trigger allergies in babies with a predisposition to them if introduced before six months of age (Greer et al. 2008).

Feeding complementary foods to your baby before he is ready is typically messy and inefficient as he will naturally push the food out with his tongue as long as the tongue-reflex is functioning. By waiting for him to be developmentally ready, he becomes an active participant in eating, rather than merely a passive recipient. This helps to put him in charge of how much he eats, teaching him important fullness cues.

Starting solid foods before your baby is ready will not increase his sleep at night, is not necessary for larger babies, and does not initially increase calories.

Introducing Complementary Foods

Learning to eat solid foods is a new skill for babies. It will be awhile before your baby needs significant calories or nutrients from foods other than your milk, so consider

these first “meals” as sensory experiments. Try to keep the “lessons” pleasant and relaxed—for you and your baby.

- Your milk is still the most nutritious food your baby will need, so breastfeed him first and then offer solid food. He will have received the benefit of his mother's milk, and will be ready to learn a new skill. Hungry babies may not be eager to cooperate in new ventures.
- Offer small amounts of food. Your baby is learning to eat and enjoy new textures, rather than having a full meal.
- Offer food when the baby is in the mood to learn. This could be during a quiet time, or it could be at a social time when the rest of the family is also eating.
- Introduce new foods a week apart. This way, a reaction to a particular food can be tracked. Some signs of a possible allergic reaction include a rash, runny nose, or sore bottom. If you see any of these signs, wait a week and try the food again. If you get the same reaction, hold off until your baby is a year old and try again.
- If your baby does not seem to like a new food, offer it again at another time. It may take a few times before he learns to enjoy a new flavor.

Adding solid foods is the first step toward weaning, though breastfeeding may continue for months or years after introducing solids. Adding solid foods to your baby's diet:

- Replaces your milk with another food.
- Impacts your milk supply.
- May hasten the return of your menstrual cycle and fertility.



- As with your milk, allow baby to control the amount he eats, and stop when he is done. Offering “finger foods” allows your baby to do this.
- Remember that playing with food is part of learning. Your baby may make a mess and enjoy it thoroughly!
- Do not leave your baby alone while he is eating. Do not offer him solid food while he is lying on his back.

Ideal Foods to Offer

The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding, a La Leche League International book, suggests offering complementary foods in the following order, waiting a week between the introductions of any new foods:

- soft, sweet, mild-tasting fruit or vegetable: banana, sweet potato (cooked), or avocado chopped up so that the baby can feed himself safely
- protein-rich foods (meat or beans) cooked until tender and offered in small pieces
- whole grain breads and cereals
- fresh and cooked fruits (if canned, buy water packed fruits)
- yogurt, natural cheese, and cottage cheese can all be offered when the baby is nine or 10 months of age (consider avoiding if there is a family history of dairy allergies)
- whole milk and other dairy products, eggs, and citrus products can be offered after one year of age
- honey is not recommended until the child is at least one to two years old because of the risk of botulism poisoning caused by spores of *Clostridium botulinum* that can be found in honey.

- Traditionally, many pediatricians have recommended not to give infants eggs, fish, peanuts, or any nuts in the first year of life

Allow your baby to explore the taste of new foods without added spices, flavorings, or enhancements (for example, stay away from butter and smoked meats). Baby food need not be prepared separately—simply remove fully cooked ingredients before seasoning when making soups, stews, and similar dishes. Foods can and should be appropriate to your home and culture.

Sweeteners of any kind are not necessary for a healthy diet, and most are highly processed. Avoid introducing them for as long as possible.

Good nutrition means eating a well-balanced and varied diet of foods in as close to their natural state as possible. This is as true for infants as it is for anyone else. Many commercial baby foods have added sweeteners, spices, thickeners, and even artificial colors. If commercial foods are offered, read ingredient lists carefully.

The process of starting complementary foods may take from three to six months. Once your baby is eating a variety of foods without any signs of allergy or distress, there is less concern about mixing foods or introducing something new. As long as your baby is offered nourishing whole foods, his appetite can be the guide as to what he wants to eat and when he wants to eat it.

Resources

La Leche League Leaders are accredited volunteers who are available to help with breastfeeding questions in person, over the phone, and online. Locate an LLL Leader near you @ l.li.org.

AAP statement, 2005: www.aap.org

APHA Statement, 2007: www.apha.org

Greer, F.R., Sicherer, S.H., Burks, A.W.; American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Nutrition; American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Allergy and Immunology. Effects of early nutritional interventions on the development of atopic disease in infants and children: the role of maternal dietary restriction, breastfeeding, timing of introduction of complementary foods, and hydrolyzed formulas. Pediatrics 2008 Jan; 121(1):183-91.

WHO policy statement, 2003: www.who.int

The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding. Schaumburg, IL: La Leche League International, 2004.