

Starting solids

Chilled Mama's guide to the why, when,
what & how of weaning.



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Introduction

The government and the World Health Organisation recommend introducing solid foods around about 6 months, alongside milk.

This leaflet will look at the science behind the recommendations and what that means for you and your baby, the pros and cons of different approaches to weaning, and the practicalities of getting started.

The most important message is not to worry. Make this a fun and positive experience for you and your baby.

Food is more than nutrition. Parents want their children to grow up with a positive attitude to food—and this starts at weaning. Think about what your approach will teach your child about food. Make it a social time; give a variety; let them explore new foods through touch & smell; leave the stress out.

Weaning is a developmental step, like rolling over and crawling. Follow your baby's lead. Go at their pace. Give them the opportunities and stand back and watch.

Developing a positive attitude to food

Food is more than nutrition. Food is social. Food is sensory, with its taste, textures, colours, shapes, temperature, and smells. Food is an emotional experience. It is one of life's pleasures.

However some people have negative associations with food, whether comfort eating or with an eating disorder such as anorexia. Our attitude sets the scene. If we implore children to eat more with 'here comes the aeroplane' or to finish their plate, we set the expectation to eat beyond being full. When we ask them to be good and 'have one more spoon for mummy', we give the message that eating is about pleasing others. When we say, 'no pudding unless you eat all your peas/dinner/potato', we are putting a higher value on sweet things. Many dieticians would like us to give children their pudding at the same time as their main meal, and let them go between the two.

Most parents want their children to have a positive attitude towards food and eating, and to avoid fussy eating. As parents we also worry about what our children are eating, and that they are getting enough nutrition. We want them to grow and be healthy. It can be easy to lose sight of our wider goal of a positive attitude for food and become obsessed with how much, or little, they have eaten.

It is not our responsibility to make our children eat. Our responsibility lies with providing a varied and nutritious diet. They have the responsibility to eat. To help our children become confident and self controlled adults who make good choices we need to start early. If we think about it from the child's point of view it can help us to see that our 'helpful' actions can get in the way.

If your child does not eat much, they could be poorly or teething. Maybe they are not hungry. From my experience with my own children, they have one mealtime when they eat lots, one that is middling, and one that they hardly eat anything at all. Each child is

different. Maybe one eats like a king at lunchtime, sometimes has a good breakfast, but barely eats anything at tea time, and another is completely the other way around. It's the same with adults. Some of us love a hearty fry up for breakfast, while others can't bare the thought of eating before mid-morning.

Similarly some babies go straight to three meals a day at six months, thank you very much, and others are still picking as they approach their first birthday.

Your child might not be hungry. We impose meal times on children that might not fit with your baby's circadian rhythm. They could be telling the truth when they say they are not hungry, and even if half an hour later they are asking for food. (You don't have to cook another meal. In our house if you are hungry later then it's cereal or toast.)

Children are quite capable of managing their own nutritional intake. In a study, quoted in the excellent book 'My child won't eat' by Dr Carlos Gonzalez, a buffet table is laid out with a huge range of foods. Children aged 2 and 3 were free to graze from the table. From video, researchers worked out the nutritional intake each child had consumed – and every child had taken the right amounts of every nutrient.

If we put emotions into mealtimes, if they becomes about our feelings about having prepared food they haven't eaten, or our worry about them not eating, children will pick this up and associate food with stress. Stress stops us being able to digest and can give us stomach cramps. If you get upset that your child hasn't eaten much you are creating a situation in which they will eat less.

Children have very little control over their environment and their lives. Giving children choices is shown to improve behaviour, even if it is blue trousers or green trousers. The only elements children truly have control over is what goes in – and what comes out (and supporting potty training as a developmental step is another booklet!). If we

create an atmosphere of confrontation, where the child feels under pressure or powerless, they may use food to exert some control. Take away the pressure to eat and you diffuse the whole situation.

The best way to encourage a positive attitude to food is to have a relaxed approach to weaning. The approach I advocate is to see starting solid food as a normal developmental stage. To let them explore and play with food, get used to the different flavours and textures. Through experimentation and sitting at the family meal table, babies will learn to eat, and enjoy food. Remember a person needs to taste something between 12 and 25 times (depending which book or study you read) before they get used to it.

You may well find they go through phases of eating well. Usually around four they start wanting food separated out – pasta on one side, and sauce on the other. It will improve. I've had two picky eaters and two that would always eat anything. Now they are all teenagers or adults and they all eat a really wide variety of foods.

There is only one method that has been shown to improve the eating habits of children – and that is to see their parents eating well.

Avoiding fussy eating

- **Let your child play with their food** We don't eat a food we don't know without touching, smelling, and a tentative taste. When I worked at a Sure Start children's centre dieticians referred families with a fussy eater to our messy play sessions – to play with food.
- **Don't wipe their face while they are eating.** If you are enjoying your food, with chocolate running down your chin, absorbed in the sensation, and your mouth was wiped with a cold cloth it would be an unpleasant experience. If babies have this repeatedly, they start to associate food with negative sensations.
- **Encourage tasting** Look, touch, smell, lick, kiss, taste the food.
- **Involve your child in the shopping and cooking** Give them tastes.

Why do we introduce solid foods at about 6 months?

- Iron stores begin to drop around 6 months (less so in babies who had delayed cutting of their umbilical cord at birth).
- Allow the baby to experience different textures and tastes, ready for when baby needs more than milk—at about a year.
- Fits with their natural developmental stage: this is when babies naturally start putting food to their mouth, chewing it, moving it around the mouth, swallowing and digesting it, due to the changes in their body. (More on the next page.)
- Supports other aspects of their development: curiosity; eye–hand–mouth coordination; early handwriting skill of making marks in things such as custard!

Not such good reasons to introduce solid foods:

- Baby needs more than milk. **False:** milk is highly nutritious for babies and gives pretty much all they need till one. Even after one it gives 30% of babies nutritional requirements.
- Helps baby to sleep. **False:** sorry, they've researched it and for some babies it works but for lots it doesn't. Babies are biologically programmed to wake more frequently between 4 and 5 months to stock up on milk ready for the big physical changes that happen between 5 and 6 months.
- Big baby. **False:** big babies just need more milk. Replacing nutrient– and calorie–rich milk with rice, fruit and veg doesn't give a big baby what they need.

Note: babies who were born premature or very small may be advised by their paediatrician to start on solid foods earlier as they might not have the stores of vitamins.

What are the signs of readiness?

There are good reasons for the recommendation of introducing solids around six months. There are lots of physical changes between 5 and 6 months that relate to a baby's ability to cope with solid foods.

Stomach Changes in the tummy mean the baby can digest food; also the tummy and digestive system straightens out.

Sign: baby can sit up on their own.

Mouth The roof of the baby's mouth rises (ready for speech) and the baby's jaw becomes more developed and can move in a gnawing, side to side motion.

Sign: baby puts things accurately to move and gnaws.

Tongue The tongue loses its 'tongue thrust reflex' (a protective action) and can move in more directions, to move food around the mouth and to the back of the mouth for swallowing.

Sign: pushes food straight out or doesn't stick out the tongue when someone tried to put something in their mouth.

Immune system This is more developed around 6 months so baby is less likely to get a react to food or to any germs that may come with the food.

You are looking for all the signs, not just one.

Waiting till they show the signs of readiness is in line with their development stage—and that makes it much easier, for you and them.

Around six months is when babies have the physical ability to pick food up; put it to their mouths; chew and move it around their mouth; move it to the back of the mouth; swallow it; and digest it. Some babies will be ready a bit before six months and others a bit after.

Another advantage of waiting is that when they go onto solid food their poos very quickly change from baby poo to like adult poo. No rush for that!

Not signs of readiness

Watching you eat They also watch you brush your hair, and hang the washing out. They do not know that food tastes nice nor that it will stop them feeling hungry. So many parents feel guilty that their baby is watching every mouth full, but they are just watching and learning.

Grabbing food off your plate They also grab your phone, your pen, the remote control. Again, it doesn't mean they are hungry – just curious. Of course you can let them play with it. If they are not ready for solid foods they may put it in their mouth but are likely to spit it out. It is when they grab, put accurately to their mouth and can gnaw.

Waking in the night More likely a growth spurt, or rather, a period of high milk demand that comes before a growth spurt. There's a big one about 16 weeks.

Has teeth Some babies are born with teeth and some don't get their first tooth until they are over one year old. Teeth are not necessary for solids. Their gums are hard enough – as you know.

Why does it say four months on the jars?

There are no restrictions, at the moment, on manufacturers to provide food that is suitable for babies. They can advertise it for whatever age they want.



How to start?

How you start depends on your baby's age, or rather, their development. If you give solids before these changes have taken place in their body, how you do it is different to giving solids after the changes.

Before six months	After six months	What changes
Only fruit and veg	Family foods (spag bol etc)	Digestive system
No meat, dairy, eggs	Everything except honey, shellfish, & uncooked egg	Digestive system
Puree only	Finger food, mashed food	Mouth and tongue
Sterilise bowls & spoons	No need to sterilise	Immune system
One food at a time in case of allergic reaction	Many foods	Immune system

Probably the most common first food is baby rice, but there are few nutrients in it, and doesn't give babies experience of different textures or tastes. There is no need to ever give it to your baby. That can feel funny, because it seems such a part of our culture. One of the reasons babies are still being given it is because parents want to do what has been done before, or what family are suggesting. Being comfortable with a new approach to weaning is important.

Have you ever been on a diet? What could you eat lots of? Rice, veg and fruit. Traditional Western weaning foods of rice, and pureed veg and fruit are diet foods. Our babies need high calorie, high fat foods to help their bodies grow and give them energy to move. Fruit and veg are great for babies for the vitamins and the different tastes and textures, but just as important are the foods that are high in iron. Remember it is iron that is needed at six months. Every mouthful of solids your baby takes reduces the amount of milk he will take. So a variety of foods is needed including fats, protein, and carbohydrates.

Cautions

As well as the foods to avoid, shown in the table on the previous page there are some things to be cautious about. There is no requirement for baby food to be suitable for babies. In fact some of the foods marketed at babies and children are worse for them than the adult versions. So you have to become a savvy shopper – check those labels!

Salt Babies under 12 months should have less than 1g of salt a day (0.4g sodium) and children 1 to 3 years no more than 2g a day (0.8 sodium). So avoid baked beans (make your own with cannellini beans and tinned toms) and instant hot oats. Don't add salt to cooking – add it at the end to your plate. A low salt gravy is best, but remember baby will only be having a tiny amount of the gravy.

Sugar High sugar content is 15g/100g; low sugar is 5g/100g or less. Avoid baby rusks, children's yogurts (make your own with Greek yogurt and fruit puree). Watch out for hidden sugars such as maltose, fructose, and hydrolysed starch.

Bran Wholewheat bread and pasta is fine but high fibre foods such as bran are not easily digested.

Myths The only foods to avoid are the ones on the table over. You may hear of others but it is not necessary to avoid them. Strawberries and nuts are fine (except whole nuts) unless you have those allergies in your family. Kiwi and oranges and other citrus fruits are fine, just acidic so don't give your baby too much and avoid if have a sore bot.

Which meal to start?

It doesn't matter. Remember that you are supporting their new skills and we learn new skills best when we are happy and alert. So maybe when you are eating you can just pass them a bit of your food and see what they do with it. It doesn't matter what it is.

Always give milk for hunger – it's still their main source of nutrition.

Baby led weaning

Up till now you have trusted your baby to tell you when they were hungry and when they were full. We called this baby led *feeding*. Baby led *weaning* simply continues from that. With this approach you give the food to your baby, and they put it in their mouth. They choose what they eat and how much.

Food cut into batons or pieces that can be easily held in the hand are good to start with – cooked carrots, banana, cheese, ham, broccoli florets, slices of plum, toast, pita bread, sandwich fingers, fusilli pasta. Mushier food can be grabbed and eaten/sucked out of their hand – cottage pie, scrambled egg, risotto, casserole.

Runny foods such as yogurt, stewed apple and porridge, even purees, can still be given. Parents either give the baby the pot and the spoon and their baby does it all themselves, or the parent loads the spoon and passes to the baby, who puts it in their mouth. You can get a good system going with two spoons, loading one while the baby eats. (Porridge – ordinary porridge oats are fine, no need to buy expensive baby porridge.)

Baby led weaning

Spoon feeding by parents

Baby is active.

Less time consuming. You can eat your dinner while they eat theirs.

You don't have to prepare separate meals. They can eat the family meals.

Less likely to be fussy eaters.

Start using cutlery earlier.

Baby is passive.

You know how much they are eating – but do you need to know?

It is less messy. (You can get a mat, and a bib with sleeves – and a dog – and it gets better.)

Easier out – but with baby led weaning it can be just as easy.

It is too difficult to go through all the different foods and how to prepare but just use your common sense. We all know now to cut grapes up long ways, and that applies to many other foods. Chicken can be hard for babies to chew so either give it in large pieces for them to gum the goodness out of, or chop it up into tiny pieces and mix with a sauce or mashed potato. There are lots of videos on YouTube of baby led weaning. One of my favourites is of a baby chomping happily on a chicken leg.

When your baby is about 8 months they will develop their pincer action and will be able to pick up smaller pieces of food – peas, cubes of cheese.

If you don't feel comfortable going completely baby led, you can do a mixture of baby led and spoon feeding. It is not either or. It's your baby.

It is worth a quick word on portion sizes, something we are not good at in this country. The Caroline Walker Trust produce an excellent guide 'Eating well in the first year' which has recipes and menu ideas and specifies portion sizes.

Snacks ~ and food on the move

Many parents take a pot around with them, a takeaway tub is ideal size. In it they have a couple of sandwiches, some fruit and veg, some pitta bread or something like a scone. This is better than the common starch based snacks. It is quite common for parents to notice that their child has become constipated since starting solids. That can be because they are predominately giving starch based snacks and not enough fruit and veg.

When your child is over one you can think of them having five meals a day – three main mealtimes and two snack times. At least one of the snack times should contain a protein.

Drinks

Milk remains their main source of nutrition until one. Breastmilk is still good for your baby. There is no need to stop breastfeeding at six months and you maximise your protection against female reproductive cancers the longer you feed for. If you are going back to work you can give expressed milk in a cup.

First stage formula milk is all you need. Follow on milk was only created when the government prevented advertising of formula milk to babies under one. The other different types of milk, such as hungrier baby, have the same nutrient levels as stage one milk – they just have more bulk ingredients that take longer to digest.

Cow's milk can be used on cereal and in food (cheese sauce) from 6 months and as a drink to replace formula milk from a year. Research has shown that formula milks for over ones, such as growing up milk, are no better for children than ordinary cow's milk.

You will find the number of feeds, and the amount per feed, drops off as your baby takes more solids. As ever follow your baby's lead.

Water can be given with meals. Before six months it should be cool boiled water, but after six months it can be tap water. Mineral water is no suitable.

Avoid baby juices – they are just sugared water. Fruit juice can be given at mealtimes, but should be diluted at least 50%.

Use an open topped cup whenever possible, such as a Doidy cup. Let them practise in the bath.

Don't be surprised if your baby has three or four days, or even a week of suddenly refusing food and having more milk – it could be teeth or illness. Follow your baby's lead.

It is your responsibility to provide the nutritious food; it is your baby's responsibility to eat it – or not. It is not a reflection on you.

Teeth

Which leads me on to teeth! Weaning is a great time to start thinking about oral health. Your baby's mouth can recover from four acid attacks a day – so limit acidic and sugary food to meal times. Raisins and other dried fruit have partially broken down sugars so are not good for a between meal snack.

Start brushing your baby's gums now. You can use a muslin pulled over your finger. Once there are teeth use a smear of toothpaste.

Choking

There is a difference between choking and gagging. If a child is choking they can't make a noise because their air pipe is blocked. Gagging is noisy. In babies the gag reflex point is further forward than in adults. They will gag as they learn how small and how chewed food needs to be before swallowing. Research has shown that when babies put the food in their mouths it goes in at the front of the mouth and is moved to the back as they masticate it. Whereas if adults put the food in the baby's mouth it is placed further back and the baby is more likely to gag as it hasn't had time to mash up the food, nor get used to the texture and size of the food before swallowing.

I recommend looking up St John's Ambulance's video about dealing with a choking baby.

Links

Baby led weaning by Gill Rapley – book, recipe book & website.

NHS Start for life – recipes and more info

First steps nutrition trust – 'Eating well in the first year' plus 'Eating well recipe book', 'Eating well for new mums' and 'Eating well for vegan infants and under 5s.'