

# Starting Solid Foods

Rice, oatmeal, or barley? What infant cereal or other food will be on the menu for your baby's first solid meal? Have you set a date?

At this point, you may have a plan or are confused because you have received too much advice from family and friends with different opinions.

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help you prepare for your baby's transition to solid foods.

## When can my baby begin solid foods?

Here are guidelines from the AAP book *Nutrition: What Every Parent Needs to Know*. Remember that each child's readiness depends on his own rate of development.

- **Can he hold his head up?** Your baby should be able to sit in a high chair, a feeding seat, or an infant seat with good head control.
- **Does he open his mouth when food comes his way?** Babies may be ready if they watch you eating, reach for your food, and seem eager to be fed.
- **Can he move food from a spoon into his throat?** If you offer a spoon of rice cereal, he pushes it out of his mouth, and it dribbles onto his chin, he may not have the ability to move it to the back of his mouth to swallow it. That's normal. Remember, he's never had anything thicker than breast milk or formula before, and this may take some getting used to. Try diluting it the first few times; then, gradually thicken the texture. You may also want to wait a week or two and try again.
- **Is he big enough?** Generally, when infants double their birth weight (typically at about 4 months of age) and weigh about 13 pounds or more, they may be ready for solid foods.

**NOTE:** The AAP recommends breastfeeding as the sole source of nutrition for your baby for about 6 months. When you add solid foods to your baby's diet, continue breastfeeding until at least 12 months. You can continue to breastfeed after 12 months if you and your baby desire.

Check with your child's doctor about the recommendations for vitamin D and iron supplements during the first year.

## How do I feed my baby?

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 inside her mouth, or reject it altogether.

One way to make eating solids for the first time easier is to give your baby a little breast milk, formula, or both first; then switch to very small half-spoonfuls of food; and finish with more breast milk 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.

Do not make your baby eat if she cries or turns away when you feed her. Go back to breastfeeding or bottle-feeding exclusively for a time before trying again. Remember that starting solid foods is a gradual process; at first, your baby will still be getting most of her nutrition from

breast milk, formula, or both. Also, each baby is different, so readiness to start solid foods will vary.

**NOTE:** Do not put baby cereal in a bottle because your baby could choke. It may also 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.

## Which food should I give my baby first?

Your baby's first foods are your choice. Whether you decide to make your own baby food or buy premade baby food, you have many options. However, keep the following in mind:

- Foods should be soft or pureed to prevent choking.
- Introduce one "single-ingredient" new food from any food group every 3 to 5 days. Look out for any reactions.
- There is no evidence that waiting to introduce baby-safe (soft) foods, such as eggs, dairy, soy, peanut products, or fish, beyond 4 to 6 months of age prevents food allergy. However, testing for peanut allergy is recommended for babies with severe eczema and/or egg allergy. Check with your child's doctor about how and when to give peanut products.
- There is no evidence that your baby will develop a dislike for vegetables if fruit is given first.
- Be sure to include foods that provide iron and zinc, such as baby food made with meat or iron-fortified cereals.
- If you feed your baby premade cereal, make sure it is made for babies and is iron fortified. Baby cereals are available premixed in individual containers or dry, to which you can add breast milk, formula, or water.

Within a few months of starting solid foods, your baby's daily diet should include a variety of foods, such as breast milk, formula, or both; meats; cereal; vegetables; fruits; eggs; and fish.

## When can I give my baby 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 prevent choking, make sure anything you give your baby 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, finely chopped chicken; and well-cooked, cut-up potatoes or peas.

At each of your baby's daily meals, she should be eating about 4 ounces, or the amount in one small jar of strained baby food. Limit giving your baby processed foods that are made for adults and older children. 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. Although 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.

**NOTE:** Do not give your baby any food that requires chewing at this age. Do not give your baby any food that can be a choking hazard, including hot dogs (including meat sticks, or 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; and hard, gooey, or sticky candy.

## What changes can I expect after my baby starts solids?

When your baby starts eating solid foods, his stools will become more solid and variable in color. Because of 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 baby’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 find the reason.

## Should I give my baby juice?

Babies do not need juice. Babies younger than 12 months should not be given juice. After 12 months of age (up to 3 years of age), give only 100% fruit juice and no more than 4 ounces a day. 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. Juice reduces the appetite for other, more nutritious, foods, including breast milk, formula, or both. Too much juice can also cause diaper rash, diarrhea, or excessive weight gain.

## Does my baby need water?

Healthy babies do not need extra water. Breast milk, formula, or both provide all the fluids they need. However, it’s OK to offer a little water when you begin to give your baby solid foods. Use an open, sippy, or strawed cup and limit water to no more than 1 cup (8 ounces) each day. Also, a small amount of water may be needed in very hot weather. If you live in an area where the water is fluoridated, drinking water will also help prevent future tooth decay.

## Good eating habits start early

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

Encourage family meals from the first feeding. When you can, the whole family should eat together. Research suggests that having dinner together, as a family, on a regular basis has positive effects on the development of children.

Remember to offer a good variety of healthy foods that are rich in the nutrients your child needs. Watch your child for cues that he has had enough to eat. Do not overfeed!

If you have any questions about your child’s nutrition, including concerns about your child eating too much or too little, talk with your child’s doctor.

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