

Complementary feeding (weaning)

During the first year, a baby grows more quickly than at any other time in his or her life. This rapid period of growth means that babies need a lot of energy and nutrients to ensure that they can grow well.

What is complementary feeding?

Initially, babies only need breast milk, or a suitable formula milk, but as they get older, they need to have other sources of nutrition to help with growth and development. Complementary feeding (often called weaning) is the introduction of solid foods into the diet of a baby who is drinking breast milk or formula milk. It is a gradual process but, by the time they are one year old, most children will be eating chopped, mashed family food.

Why should we start this?

We need to introduce complementary feeding to children so they are able to get all of the nutrients they need from the foods they eat. Biting and chewing also help to develop the muscles needed for speech development. At or around six months old, a child's body stores of some nutrients, such as iron, start to run out. Therefore, it is important that when cow's milk is introduced as the main drink at one year of age, babies should be eating a varied diet, which meets their nutritional requirements

When should I introduce complementary foods to my child?

The Department of Health (DH) recommends exclusive breastfeeding until six months (26 weeks) of age. Introducing solid food should start at around six months. Some parents, however, may wish to introduce solid food earlier, and four months (17 weeks) is the earliest age that this should be started. Pre-term babies need to be introduced to solid food according to their individual needs, and advice should be sought from the dietitian and the medical team looking after your child.



What kind of foods should be used?

Solid foods are often introduced in stages (see table overleaf). The ages are approximate and will depend on when complementary feeding is first started – every baby is different and will develop at his or her own pace. It is important to keep offering different tastes and textures through your baby's first year. The DH recommends that fruit, vegetables and baby rice are appropriate first foods.

What about drinks?

Breast-fed babies do not need any additional drinks, but formula-fed babies may need some extra (cooled boiled) water in hot weather. There is no need for babies to be offered juices, as even juices with natural sugars can cause tooth decay. After six months, babies should be offered regular breastfeeds. If they are being formula fed they should be offered 500-600ml of suitable infant formula.

Is it okay to use commercial baby foods?

It is best, and often great fun, for children to be introduced to the foods that the family eat. Children who only eat commercial (jar/packet) baby foods, may not like family foods once they are offered. However, some commercial baby foods can be incorporated into the diet initially, and many parents find them convenient.

Table of weaning stages

Babies are ready for solid foods when their digestive systems are developed enough to cope – this is usually at around six months. But every baby is an individual so if you think yours is ready earlier, speak to a member of your health visiting team. Finger foods are foods cut up into big enough pieces for your baby to hold in their fist and stick out at the top. They should not be small enough that they may cause your baby to choke. A piece about the size of your own finger is a good approximate. This will help your baby to learn to chew.

Stage	Age range	Consistency	Food
1	Around six months	Thicker consistency with some lumps; soft finger foods can also be introduced at this stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fruit and vegetables rice, pasta, potatoes, yam, bread and cereals
2	Nine - twelve months	Mashed, chopped, minced consistency; more finger foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> meat, fish, pulses and eggs yoghurt, custard and cheese
3	Twelve months and older	Mashed, chopped family foods and a variety of finger foods.	

Which foods should be avoided?

Salt – up to seven months, a baby should eat less than 1g of salt per day (breastmilk and formula milks contain the right amount of salt). Between seven months and one year, 1g of salt per day is the maximum. Salt should not be added to foods, and salty foods, such as bacon, cheese and some processed foods, should be limited.

Sugar – avoid adding any sugar to foods and drinks for babies.

Honey – should not be given to children under one year. It can contain bacteria which could lead to infant botulism (where the bacteria causes a baby harm).

Nuts – can be given from around six months old, if they are finely ground. Children under five years old should not have whole nuts because of the risk of choking and inhalation.

Gluten – there is now no need to avoid gluten in the introduction of foods to an infant's diet. Gluten can be introduced into the diet anytime between 4-12 completed months of age.

Is it safe to wean onto a vegetarian or vegan diet?

Children can grow and develop normally on a vegetarian or vegan diet, although more attention needs to be given to ensure that nutritional needs are met. Vegetarian and vegan diets can be high in fibre, and this can lead to lower energy (calorie) intake, and reduced absorption of some important minerals,

such as iron and zinc. Speak to your health visitor or a paediatric dietitian for advice on a vegetarian or vegan diet for your baby.

Does my child need supplements?

The UK Health Department recommends that all babies aged six months onwards should be given a supplement containing vitamins A and C unless they are drinking 500ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day (infant formula has vitamins added to it). In addition to this, it is also recommended that all babies under one years old are given a daily supplement containing 8.5-10mcg of vitamin D, unless they are drinking 500ml of infant formula a day. You can continue to give young children a supplement containing vitamins A, C and D until they are five years old, as this will help to make sure that they are getting enough of these vitamins. After the age of five, you may want to consider continuing to give your child a daily supplement containing 10mcg of vitamin D, especially during autumn and winter. This is especially important when they are learning to eat a variety of foods and if they are fussy eaters. Vegan children also need vitamin B12. If you didn't take vitamin D supplements throughout your pregnancy and are planning on breast feeding, your health visitor may advise giving your baby vitamin D from the age of one month.

Summary

The introduction of complementary foods is a crucial stage in your baby's development, but it can also be a fun one. Introducing new foods at the right time will help your baby develop and grow into a healthy child. This stage gives you, as parents, the chance to make a positive impact on your child's diet for life.



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To check your dietitian is registered check www.hcpc-uk.org

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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