Introducing Solid Foods to Infants

Is Your Baby Ready for Solid Foods?
Solid foods can complement the nutrition from breast milk or formula. When ready for solid foods, your baby will:

• have good head control, holding head up without wobbling
• be able to sit well with little support.
• have doubled their birth weight and weigh at least 13 pounds.
• still be hungry after 8 to 10 breast feedings, or after drinking 32 ounces of formula a day.
• show interest in foods that others are eating.
• lean toward food or spoon and may open mouth in anticipation.
• be able to move foods from the front to the back of the mouth.
• be able to pick up and hold a small object in their hand.
• be able to feed themselves with their fingers.
• drink from a cup with your help.
• be able to turn away to signal “enough.”

If your baby doesn’t seem interested, don’t force them to eat solid foods. Simply wait a few days and try again.

Feeding Tips
The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and Nutrition Facts on food labels don’t apply to children under age two. Infant and toddler food labels supply different information from adult food labels. Serving sizes are based on average amounts that an infant or toddler will eat at one time. Also, food labels don’t list the calories from fat, just the total fat and trans fat per serving.

Don’t limit the fat intake of a baby or toddler less than two years of age. They are growing fast and need fat as a concentrated energy source and for the essential fatty acids it contains.

Serve your baby several mini-meals, because their stomach is small and fills up quickly. Choose the same healthy foods for snacks that you serve at mealtime so your baby learns to eat healthy foods any time of day.

Your baby will set the pace for feeding, so don’t rush them or try to go slower. Let your baby rest between spoonfuls to feel full and avoid overeating.

Reward good behavior with praise and hugs, not food. Rewarding your baby’s good behavior with food causes a negative relationship with food.

Add Solid Foods Slowly: The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends feeding only breast milk or a prepared iron-fortified formula until infants are four to six months of age. Because all babies are not ready to eat solid foods at the same time, your baby’s doctor can tell you the best time to start giving solids to your infant. Refer to HGIC 4100, Feeding Your Infant for general guidelines on when to offer specific foods to your infant.

Introduce New Foods Properly: Follow these tips when giving new foods to your baby.

• Begin with single-ingredient foods.
• Try only one new food at a time. Let your baby adjust to it for about a week before offering the next new food. This allows you time to watch for signs of an allergic reaction (e.g. rash, hives, coughing, diarrhea or vomiting), and it makes it easier for you to determine which food may have caused it.
• Offer food in small amounts, which have been mixed with a little breast milk, formula
or water. It should be thin and smooth, or about as thick as cream. Start with one or two teaspoons of food. As the baby wants more, increase the amount to one or two tablespoons, two to three times a day.

- When introducing cereal, offer iron-fortified infant rice cereal first, since babies are least likely to be allergic to it. Offer other single-grain cereals before mixed grains. Caution: Some infants are sensitive to wheat before one year of age.

- To help your baby’s body absorb the iron in iron-fortified cereal, serve vitamin C-rich fruits and juices along with it. After six months of age, your baby can have four to six ounces of pasteurized, unsweetened 100% fruit juice (not fruit drinks) daily. Offer juice at mealtime or snack time in a small cup, but not in a bottle, covered cup or juice box. These promote sipping throughout the day and may cause tooth decay.

- Start with smooth foods that your baby can swallow easily. Your baby is ready for mashed and finely-chopped foods when their teeth start to appear and they can make chewing motions.

- Don’t serve mixed-ingredient foods until each food has been given separately, in case your baby is allergic to an ingredient.

- If you buy mixed-ingredient foods, choose those with at least three or four grams of protein in a jar. This information is found on the Nutrition Facts label.

- Don’t give egg whites, citrus fruits, nuts, fish, shellfish or chocolate to a baby less than one year of age, because these foods may cause allergic reactions. Cooked egg yolks may be tolerated around eight months. Follow your doctor’s recommendations.

Beware of Foods That Choke: A child should be able to bite and chew foods but not put them into their mouths whole. Avoid foods that are round and firm, slippery, sticky, or cut in large chunks, since these foods may cause choking. Do not serve your infant the following:

- nuts and seeds
- raw carrots and celery
- raw peeled apple and pear slices
- unpeeled fruits and vegetables
- whole beans
- whole kernel corn
- cherry tomatoes
- whole grapes
- berries
- cherries with pits
- raisins, dates and other dried fruits
- large chunks of cheese or meat (especially tough meats)
- wieners (hot dogs)
- peanuts
- peanut butter
- adult dry cereal
- popcorn
- chips
- pretzels
- pickles
- whole olives
- marshmallows (regular or miniature)
- hard candies
- gel or gummy candies
- jelly beans
- taffy
- caramels
- cough drops
- chewing gum

Toddlers can begin to eat some of these foods if cut into small pieces. Appropriate finger foods for older babies and toddlers are pieces of banana, graham crackers, and strips of cheese or bagels. Usually a toddler can manage food up to ¼ inch, and a preschooler can eat food no larger than ½ inch.

Avoid feeding your baby in the car, because it is hard to help them if they get choked while the car is moving. Propping your baby’s bottle at feeding time is a choking hazard, also. Be prepared to use the Heimlich maneuver technique for infants and toddlers if your child is choking and can’t breathe, cough, talk, or cry.

Encourage Baby to Accept New Foods: Don’t give up if your baby rejects a new food the first time you offer it to them. Research shows that a baby must be exposed to a new food up to 10 times before they decide they like it. If your baby makes a little face when you offer a new food, they are simply saying, “I don’t recognize that food.”
To improve chances of acceptance, offer a new food at several different meals. Also, try mixing a little of a new food with one you know they already like. For example, if your baby likes bananas, then introduce peaches by mixing them with bananas.

Your baby may like foods that you dislike, so don’t let your food biases limit what you feed your baby. Offer them a wide variety of foods with different flavors, colors, shapes and textures. This makes mealtime more fun while meeting their nutritional needs. However, remember that your baby’s likes and dislikes may change from week to week.

Let Baby Drink from a Cup: Most babies enjoy trying to drink from a cup at about six to nine months of age. Choose a child-size unbreakable cup, preferably a covered one with a spout and without handles, which makes it easier for a young child to hold. Limit use to mealtime or snack time. Sipping throughout the day may cause tooth decay.

Limit Juice: Serve only small amounts of juice, and choose 100% unsweetened pasteurized fruit or vegetable juice and not fruit drinks. Make sure that drinking juice doesn’t interfere with your infant’s eating of other nutritious foods. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends giving juice only to infants who are about 6 months or older and who can drink from a cup. They also recommend offering no more than four to six ounces (TOTAL) of juice a day.

Don’t Serve Cereal Mixed With Formula From a Bottle: This practice has not been proven to help a baby sleep better through the night or stop crying. The Yale Guide to Children’s Nutrition shows no connection between eating solid foods (including cereal in a bottle) and improved sleep patterns in infants.

Serving cereal from a bottle may cause a baby to choke. Putting cereal in the milk also may give a baby too much cereal and not enough milk, leading to a lowered nutritional intake. Babies tend to fill up after eating a certain volume of food.

Recognize Cues for “I’m Hungry” and “I’m Full”: If your baby is hungry, they will move their head forward to reach the spoon and hold their mouth open as the spoon approaches. They also may swipe food toward their mouth, point, nod or grab the spoon.

To signal that they are full, your baby may:

• turn their head away from the spoon.
• spit out familiar foods.
• clench their mouth shut.
• push away the food.
• cover their face with their hands.
• become distracted.

When your baby gives you any of these cues, stop feeding and offer something to drink. If they still aren’t interested in eating, it’s time to stop. Never force your infant to clean their plate.

Know the Signs of Food Sensitivity: If your baby is sensitive to a food, they may react by developing a rash, diarrhea, vomiting or wheezing. However, a change in the consistency or color of a baby’s stool does not necessarily indicate sensitivity to a food.

Keep track of foods your baby eats, noting if any food causes a significant and ongoing reaction. If it does, then talk to your baby’s doctor or health care provider to help you develop an eating plan that’s best for your baby.

Keep Foods Safe
Avoid Honey and Corn Syrup: These foods may contain botulism spores that could cause illness or death in infants younger than twelve months of age, although they do not cause problems for older children and adults.

Serve Solid Foods Safely: Follow these steps to reduce bacterial growth in food and keep your baby from getting sick.

• Don’t serve your baby commercial baby food unless the safety button in the jar lid is down and the lid “pops” when opened. Avoid baby food jars with chipped glass or rusty lids.
• Transfer an amount of food that you think your baby will eat to a dish. Feeding directly from the baby food jar allows bacteria from the baby’s mouth to get into the food, where it may grow and multiply until the food is served again. This may make the baby sick.
• If your baby wants a second helping, take more food from the jar with a clean spoon.
• Refrigerate food left in the jar and use within one to two days after opening.
• Throw away uneaten food left in the dish.
Microwave Foods Carefully: Baby foods can be slightly warmed, served at room temperature or cold. If you decide to heat your baby’s food in the microwave, follow these safety tips.

- Follow warming guidelines on commercial baby food labels. Spoon a single serving from the original container into a dish that is microwave-safe. The heat in a microwave is uneven, causing “hot spots” in foods that can burn your baby’s mouth and throat. Food in a jar may “blow up” in your microwave.
- Heat food only a few seconds. When it reaches a lukewarm temperature, stir to prevent “hot spots,” and let “rest” for at least 30 seconds. You should warm higher-fat foods, such as meat and eggs, on the stove, because they heat faster and splatter or overheat more.
- Taste food before feeding the baby so you know the temperature is lukewarm. Feed the baby with a CLEAN spoon, and throw away any leftover food.

Follow the 2-Hour Rule: Never leave baby food, solid or liquid, at room temperature for more than two hours. If food is left out longer, bacteria can grow to harmful levels. For more food safety tips, refer to HGIC 3640, Food Safety for Mothers and Babies.

Making Your Own Baby Food
Most commercial baby food companies today don’t add salt, sugar and starch, which is a big change from the past. With nutrition labeling, you can be assured of what’s in the food. Commercial baby food companies package baby food for different stages, such as stage 1, 2 or 3, depending on the texture of the food.

However, you don’t have to buy commercially prepared infant food. You can make nutritious, economical baby food at home from fresh ingredients. For example, vegetables and fruits (fresh-cooked, canned or frozen), can be pureed with no added salt, sugar or fat. Puree means to put food through a sieve or grinder to make the food into a liquid-like, smooth texture.

Using simple kitchen tools (e.g. fork, blender, strainer, food mill, or baby food grinder), you can adapt many foods from the family table to suit your baby. You may need to add some fluid (formula, breast milk, water or cooking water) to make it the right consistency for your baby.

To freeze baby food, pour the cooled, pureed food into a paper cupcake liner or a section of a clean ice cube tray and cover with foil. When solidly frozen, place cubes in a freezer bag or container and store in the freezer. Reheat frozen cubes in a heat-resistant container in a pan of hot water.

Refer to HGIC 4259, Making Your Own Baby Food for more information and pureed baby food recipes.

Your Job and Your Child’s Job
Your role is to offer a wide variety of nutritious foods that are appropriate for your child’s age, in a friendly and loving way. Include at least one item that you’re sure your child likes. Parents also decide when and where the foods are eaten.

Your baby is responsible for deciding which of the offered foods to eat and how much. Respect your child’s choice to eat nothing sometimes, because they will usually make up the missed calories at the next meal or the next day. Never bribe or apply pressure to get your child to eat. Babies know when they have had enough and want to stop eating.

Healthy eating is a learning adventure, which begins with a positive parent-child partnership. You should set a good example by eating a variety of healthful foods. If you refuse to eat carrots or green peas, your child may react the same way.

For more information, refer to HGIC 4107, Partners for Healthy Eating.

Sources:
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