

Food for Babies

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This NebGuide explains how to add solid food to your baby's diet.

Good nutrition is vital for a baby's growth and development. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends breast-feeding for most full-term infants. No formula can replace the immunological protection a baby receives from colostrum — the breast milk produced the first few days after birth. It's important to breast-feed for at least the first few weeks, even if it can't be continued for a long time. If unable to breast-feed or if breast-feeding is discontinued before the baby's first birthday, commercially prepared infant formula is the best alternative.

Nutrients found in breast milk or appropriate iron-fortified formulas are the only sources of food your baby needs for the first four to six months and should remain the core of the diet throughout the first year. Formula-fed babies also may need plain water. What you feed your baby in the first year of life is very important because this is when your baby grows most rapidly. Babies usually triple their birth weight in the first year.

When to Start Solid Foods

The time to start semisolid or solid food depends on your baby's development. The baby's digestive system or immature kidneys may not be ready for solid foods before 4 to 6 months of age. Food allergies and choking can cause problems when feeding solids too early. Feeding too early also may cause unnecessary stress on you and your baby. Check with your doctor before beginning to feed solid foods.

Look for these signs of physical readiness that indicate your baby may be ready for solid foods.

- Your baby's birth weight has doubled.
- Your baby can sit up with support and can control his or her head.
- Your baby can control upper body movements and pull forward when food is wanted or move back when full.
- Your baby's tongue doesn't keep pushing food out.

Feed Your Baby Like a Baby

Use a very small spoon to feed solid foods. Spoons designed for babies are available at most grocery or department stores. Using a baby spoon commercially coated with plastic will help protect baby's tender gums. Never use a bottle or infant-feeder for semisolid or solid foods like cereal because they can increase the possibility of choking or overfeeding. When offering solid foods the first time to your baby, pick a day when both you and your baby are in a good mood. Trying solid food for the first time is a big event for both you and the baby. This time should not be rushed.

Introduce only one food at a time. Wait a week before introducing another food and always watch to see if the baby has any reaction such as vomiting, diarrhea, wheezing or a skin rash. If you feed only one new food at a time and there is no reaction, you can continue feeding that food without concern about possible allergies. If your baby doesn't want to eat a new food, don't force the issue. Offer it again the next day. If the food is still refused, wait two or three weeks before offering it again.

The First Solid Food

Baby's first solid food should be dry-packed, iron-fortified baby cereal mixed with breast milk, formula or water. Dry cereals are usually the first solid foods given to infants because they meet the baby's iron requirements. Start with rice cereal since it is least likely to cause an allergic reaction. After successfully feeding rice cereal for a week, you may introduce another infant cereal such as oatmeal or barley cereal. Wheat and mixed cereals should be introduced last because of possible allergic reactions. To mix baby's first cereal, use 1 teaspoon dry cereal with 2 to 3 tablespoons of breast milk, formula or water. Read the label on the dry cereal package and use the liquid recommended. The mixture should be very thin. As your baby is able to accept more food, mix equal parts of liquid to dry cereal. Do not use raw or pasteurized cow's milk to mix cereal. Cow's milk is difficult for a baby's system to digest until after 1 year of age.

At first give only a small amount of cereal — about 1 teaspoon twice a day. Gradually increase it to 2 to 3

tablespoons twice a day. Remember, your baby's appetite for food will be small at first. Learn your baby's signals for fullness such as starting to play, blowing bubbles, pushing the spoon away or turning the head. Respect your baby's signals for being full. Feeding babies only when hungry will teach them to pay attention their appetite. Never force feed your baby.

Introducing vegetables, fruits and meats

Introduce strained vegetables and fruits after the baby is comfortable with eating cereal. Introduce one vegetable or fruit at a time. Watch for reactions that may indicate food sensitivity. Begin by adding mild-flavored vegetables such as carrots, yellow squash, sweet potatoes or green beans and then add fruits such as peaches, applesauce and pears. After your baby accepts several kinds of vegetables, offer two varieties each day for added nutrition. Beets, spinach and collard and turnip greens have nitrates and should be introduced after 1 year of age. Vegetables usually are introduced first because starting with the sweet taste of fruits may make some vegetables less appealing.

Offer strained, lean meats after your baby fully accepts vegetables and fruits. As with cereals, vegetables and fruits, offer a single meat at a time and watch for an allergic response. Meat dinners are not recommended because they have less protein than single ingredient foods such as strained meats or vegetables. Introduce cooked egg yolks after meats have been accepted. Egg whites may cause a food reaction and should not be introduced until after baby's first birthday.

Allergic responses to food

Allergic responses to look for after introducing new foods include:

- gastrointestinal distress such as vomiting, excessive gas or diarrhea
- skin problems such as itching, swelling, hives or rashes
- respiratory distress such as congestion, coughing or wheezing

If your baby has an allergic response to a food, consult with your baby's doctor. Certain foods are more likely than others to cause a reaction. These foods should not be offered to a child under 1 year of age:

- cow's milk
- eggs
- nuts of any kind, including nut butters
- wheat
- corn
- citrus fruits and juices
- seafood

If you think that your baby may be at risk for food allergies, you may want to consider breast-feeding for as long as possible because breast milk is the least likely to provoke an allergic reaction. If you use formula, choose a formula with care as some formulas are less likely than others to prompt an allergic reaction. Your baby's doctor will advise you on which formula would be appropriate. Delay the introduction of solid foods for as long as possible. The more time that a baby's immune system is allowed to develop, the less likely it will become sensitized to a particular food protein. Keep a record of each solid food introduced and your baby's reaction to it.

Appetite

During the first year, the main source of nutrition should be breast milk or formula. The baby should continue to have five to six breast-feedings or 24 to 40 ounces of formula in 24 hours. If milk consumption drops below 24 ounces or your baby does not want to nurse, you may be feeding too much solid food. Your baby's appetite will vary from feeding to feeding — don't force your baby to drink every drop or eat an extra spoonful. If you feel your baby is not eating enough, consult your doctor or dietitian.

First finger foods

When babies are 6 to 7 months old, they usually enjoy finger foods. Acceptable finger foods include hard toast, melba toast, crackers, and cooked vegetables and fruits. Be alert to possible choking hazards.

Home-prepared baby food

Even though manufacturers of infant foods no longer add salt or sugar to most products, many parents prefer to make their own baby food with a food processor, blender, strainer, masher or grinder. If you make your own baby food, remember:

- Follow clean, sanitary procedures in all food preparation and storage.
- Fresh or frozen foods can be used.
- The best cooking methods for baby food are steaming rather than boiling, and broiling rather than frying.
- Microwave cooking is a good preparation method, especially for vegetables, because foods can be cooked in very little water.
- Do not add salt.
- Do not add sugar.
- Do not use honey or corn syrup in any form during your baby's first year because it may contain clostridium botulinum spores. These spores may make your baby very ill, although they may not make an adult sick.
- Mash or puree clean, washed and peeled soft raw fresh fruit such as bananas, pears, strawberries or melons.

- Homecooked baby food may be immediately frozen or stored in shallow covered containers in the refrigerator for one to two days. Check that your refrigerator maintains a proper and consistent temperature of 40°F or lower.
- One way to freeze baby food is to pour pureed food into ice cube trays and freeze. When food is firmly frozen, remove the cubes and store in plastic bags or containers in the freezer for no more than two months.

If you buy commercially prepared food, remember that combination foods such as dinners and desserts often have added starch. Combination foods are more expensive and less nutritious than individual foods. Read labels to know what prepared foods contain.

Heating Baby Food

Baby food may be served cold, at room temperature or heated. Baby food should be heated in one of three ways. An electric baby dish may be used. The electric dish keeps the food at constant temperature, but food should always be stirred and tested for temperature before feeding to the baby. Do not heat baby food in baby food jars. They are not heat-resistant and can crack or break when heated in the oven, boiling water or the microwave. Food can be heated in a small heat-resistant dish placed in a saucepan with about 1 inch of water. After dishes are placed in a saucepan, heat water to simmering, not boiling. When the food is warm, remove, stir and test for temperature. A microwave oven may be used for warming baby food. Heat a few seconds and let the food stand a short time before serving. Stir food thoroughly because hot spots can be created. Food may feel cool to the touch but be hot in the middle. Always test food by placing some on your wrist or by tasting the food. Use your own spoon for tasting; never use the baby's spoon.

Don't feed your baby from a container that has more food than your baby can eat at one time. Discard what is left. It contains bacteria from the baby's mouth that can continue to grow. Opened food stored in the refrigerator for more than two days should not be fed to your baby. Labeling the food with the date when storing is a good practice. Reheat food only one time. If food is not consumed after the first reheating, discard it.

Warning

The size, shape and consistency of the following foods can cause choking:

- berries, cherries and grapes
- pickles
- raw vegetables such as peas, carrots and celery
- nuts
- raisins
- peanut butter
- adult dry cereals
- whole kernel corn
- hot dogs
- chips
- pretzels
- marshmallows (regular and miniature)
- popcorn

Summary Tips

For a successful beginning:

- Use a small spoon and feed from a dish.
- Throw away leftover food not eaten.
- Do not use the baby's spoon for tasting.
- Always refrigerate an opened jar of food immediately.
- Discard baby food that is left in the refrigerator more than two days.
- Introduce one new food at a time and be mindful that an allergic reaction can occur when introducing a new food.
- Wait a week before offering another new food.
- Do not add salt, sugar or other seasonings to food.
- Offer a variety of foods.
- Never leave a baby unattended during mealtime.
- Remember that breast milk or formula is still the main source of nutrition during the first year.
- Respect baby's signals for being full.
- Creating a friendly social setting with family and friends usually encourages your child's enjoyment of food.
- Smile when you give your baby a spoonful of food.

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