

# Feeding Your Baby & Toddler – A Guide from 5 Months to 3 Years

## FROM BIRTH TO SIX MONTHS

Over the years, pediatricians and nutritionists have adjusted the recommended age to begin introducing solid foods to your baby. **Currently, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) suggests exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a baby's life.** If formula is given, it should neither be overly diluted nor have cereal added to it. Their evidence suggests that babies that receive solid foods as young as three or four months are more likely to have excess weight gain later on.

## FEEDING YOUR BABY AFTER SIX MONTHS

**The AAP recommends continuing to breastfeed for at least the first year of life, with solid foods being added into the baby's diet gradually from 6 to 12 months of age.** It is important to remember that initially the baby is still consuming the same amount of milk (be it breast milk or formula) and the first foods given should be runny and easy to swallow. Beyond 12 months, breastfeeding can still be beneficial for both mother and baby and should continue as long as it is mutually desired.

## SIGNS THAT YOUR BABY IS READY FOR SOLIDS

Although some parents like to go by the calendar and simply start giving solid foods to their baby at five or six months of age, others prefer to go by their baby's own milestones. **Some of these signs are physical, while others are social:**

1. Your baby can sit up on her own and not topple over.
2. Your baby is able to grab objects and bring them to her mouth, even if she's not always tidy about it!
3. Your baby shows interest when watching you eat, like staring at your fork as it goes from your plate to your mouth, appearing to covet your food.
4. Your baby no longer has a tongue-thrust reflex. That is, prior to this point, she would have used her tongue to push a spoon out of her mouth.

## FIRST FEEDINGS

**Keep in mind that a baby's first "meals" of solid food are really just opportunities to experiment with a new life skill.** The quantity of food and its caloric content will likely be very small at first, so there's no reason to worry if your baby doesn't consume much initially, and also no need to reduce the amount of milk she's getting.

**First foods should be a runny, smooth consistency,** so that your baby has the chance to get used to moving something semi-solid from the front of her mouth to the back. Some parents like to dilute a baby's first purées with breast milk or formula because they find the baby takes to the new food more readily if it has a familiar flavor and smell.

**Make sure the baby is sitting up and comfortable,** either in her own seat or on your lap. Feed the baby with a small spoon; if it's rubber-coated or plastic, some babies prefer that to a cold metal spoon. Sometimes if the baby has her own spoon to play/drum with, she'll be happier to open her mouth and let you feed her with yours.

**If the baby makes a face at first, don't assume that she doesn't like the flavor of the food;** more likely, she's just getting used to the new challenge of eating rather than just drinking. If she really refuses to eat, don't stress about it. Maybe she'll feel like trying again in a few days. If at first you and your baby are only up for trying this once or twice a day, that's fine. She can just keep consuming the amount of milk she's used to. You've got months to work up to a few meals and a few snacks a day of solids.

## Some babies tackle the new challenge of eating solid foods better when they're "peckish" rather than really hungry.

Sometimes having to master a new skill is more than we can handle when we're starving! Try to choose a time of day that's calm and not rushed. Some parents like to concentrate on the single task of feeding their baby, but little ones learn from example and might take to eating more easily if you're eating along with them. Remember that eating together is an activity that humans traditionally enjoy. Try to have fun with this exciting stage in your baby's life!

## INTRODUCING NEW FOODS

Although some pediatricians' advice on if and when to introduce potentially allergenic foods has recently changed, **the old-school advice about giving the baby only one new food every few days is still sound.** That way, you can watch for signs of sensitivities or allergies, such as a rash, diarrhea, itching, or fussiness.

❖ **Cereal and grains:** In this culture, for decades parents have been taught to start out by giving their babies some kind of iron-fortified, hypoallergenic (that is, not wheat), commercially prepared baby cereal as the very first food. Although these packets are certainly handy and can easily be prepared with pumped breast milk or formula, there is little nutritional advantage to starting out with processed cereals. Why not treat your baby to something the rest of the family is already eating instead? Many cultures feed their babies plain, mashed rice served in a little of the water it was cooked in.

❖ **Vegetables:** Some new research suggests that babies take more readily to flavors that they were exposed to in utero and in their mother's milk, so if mom has been eating vegetables all along, the baby is more likely to accept these flavors. Ideally, you can begin with veggies that the rest of the household is already eating. Try starting with puréed, steamed zucchini, green beans, avocado, peas, etc. before serving the sweeter vegetables.

❖ **Fruits:** Most babies take readily to fruits. Start with whatever's in season or that your family already likes to have around. Hold off on highly acidic fruits like citrus and strawberries until the baby's a little older. If you want to let your baby try bananas, you can just scrape them with the edge of a spoon and not bother to blend them at all.

❖ **Proteins:** The advice on when to introduce babies to meat has gone up and down over the years, but many pediatricians no longer think it's necessary to hold off for very long. If your family eats meat, you can purée it for your baby to try. Soft foods like salmon, white fish, and chicken may be easier to start with than something chewier like beef or pork. Lentils and beans also make good first proteins for baby; just make sure they're smooth and watery and do not present a choking hazard.

❖ **Dairy:** Although most parents are advised not to serve cow's milk to babies before their child's first birthday, other dairy products can be easier for little ones to digest. An ideal first dairy product is whole-milk, plain yogurt. Babies need fat in their diets for healthy brain development, so don't buy skimmed-milk products. They also don't need added sugar in their diets, so it's best to avoid pre-sweetened fruit-flavored yogurts. The bacterial cultures in yogurt have digested a lot of the milk's lactose already, so that's why most babies can enjoy it at a younger age than they can have plain milk.

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## COMMERCIALLY PREPARED VS. HOMEMADE FOODS

**Whether you are preparing baby food from scratch or just opening a jar or pouch, make sure the food is a smooth, runny purée initially.** Jars of baby food are usually labeled “Stage 1” if they are meant to be one of baby’s very first foods. These jars will usually contain just a single ingredient, or else that ingredient plus water only. Likewise, if you’re cooking from scratch, your baby’s first “solids” will not be all that solid. Obviously, premade baby food is convenient and quick and can be quite healthy and nutritious. An advantage of homemade food is that baby is eating something the rest of the family is already enjoying together, just with a different texture. As long as the other members of the household are already eating a healthy, varied diet, there’s usually no need to go out and buy special items just for the baby to eat.

## FOOD ALLERGIES

**We used to warn parents to hold off on allergenic foods,** such as peanuts, tree nuts, eggs, shellfish, wheat, and soy, until babies were toddlers. The theory was that early introduction of these foods could be the cause of the allergies. However, today’s advice is not as straightforward. If either of the baby’s birth parents is allergic to a given food, perhaps this is a food that rarely comes into your home or life, so it’s easy to avoid. However, some more recent studies from around the world suggest that early introduction of these very foods may actually have a protective effect against allergies, particularly if they are given consistently throughout early childhood.

## MOVING ON FROM PURÉES

**After your baby has mastered eating purées from a spoon, don’t hesitate to let her start eating lumpier food.** Something with a texture like stewed lentils, fine soup noodles, mashed squash, or cooked oatmeal will give her the chance to move something less smooth through her mouth, while still avoiding choking hazards. This is a good time to let her experiment with grabbing the food with her hands or her own spoon. Over time, her fine motor skills will improve and she will get more accurate and less messy, but this takes practice!

**At first you may notice your baby swiping her hand through her food and not getting a whole lot into her mouth,** but little by little she will learn to pick things up with her whole hand and then eventually with her thumb and fingertips. Once she develops this “pincer grasp,” it’s important to let her try to grab finger foods on her own and not always continue to feed her with a spoon. Instead of offering processed, starchy snacks purchased especially for your baby as finger foods, try looking at your own plate and thinking about what’s appropriate to cut up small and share with her. It’s safest if everything is not only in little pieces, but also soft enough for you to mush with your tongue, since even babies with a few teeth don’t have molars yet.

Now that your baby has tried lots of different foods, **if you’ve seen no allergic reactions to anything, feel free to give her almost as much variety as the adults around her are eating.** Remember that she tasted all of mom’s food in utero and continues to do so if she’s drinking breast milk, so you can start exposing her to most of the flavors that you enjoy. As far as spices go, most babies can enjoy everything from cinnamon to garlic, but don’t add sugar or salt to their food and go easy on hot spices like cayenne or chili. Babies do need fat in their diets, so feel free to give them your sautéed food now and not just the steamed food you started with.

## MEALS VS. SNACKS

Have you ever seen a toddler or preschooler walking around with a bag of cereal, raisins, puffs, or little crackers, grazing throughout their day? Pediatricians and nutritionists recommend that little ones have a number of snacks each day, while pediatric dentists advise that constant snacking can contribute to early tooth decay. At first these viewpoints seem at odds with each other, but can be easy to follow all the advice. **When parents are recommended to give toddlers three meals and two or three snacks a day, the snacks should be little meals that have a beginning and an end, not a grazing bag that goes on and on.**

As your baby transitions from mostly milk to mostly table foods, remember that their breast milk or formula can still be one of their snacks, but once your baby has teeth, it’s best for this not to be just a slurp here or there. **Just as with a meal, the baby should be encouraged to pause, sit down, focus, and finish.** Studies show that we should let babies decide when they’ve had enough and not require them to consume more than they’re comfortable doing, but help your baby learn that when the snack is over, it’s over. Letting them graze all day can lead not only to tooth decay, but also to fussiness and lack of appetite at mealtimes.

## BEVERAGES

**Juice has all the sugar naturally found in the fruit it came from, but not the fiber.** Some studies have found that kids that drink a lot of juice tend to be shorter and heavier than children who don’t. There’s nothing wrong with a little juice now and then, but think about reserving it for special occasions. Even then, it can be diluted with water in order not to be so sweet. It’s best to avoid sodas and other sugary drinks altogether, since these provide a lot of empty calories and no real nutrition.

**Many of us were brought up with a glass of milk at every meal, but some parents find that when kids are allowed to drink this much milk, the children sometimes don’t have the appetite for much more food.** In extreme cases, this habit can even lead to anemia, since milk contains virtually no iron.

**Once your baby starts on solids, give her some water to drink with every meal.** This can be in a sippy cup rather than a baby bottle. Pediatric dentists recommend that babies start being weaned from bottles by six months of age in order to prevent tooth decay. Since water is a new beverage for your baby, it can be in a new container. Once your baby’s about a year old, feel free to experiment with giving her a regular open-topped glass.

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## ALTERNATIVE DIETS

**Many of today's parents are not eating exactly what their own families ate when they were little.** Remember that your baby is a member of your family and of your household. If yours is a vegetarian home, for example, then you shouldn't feel obliged to buy your baby something that you wouldn't otherwise have in your house. If no one in your home consumes cow's milk, there's no need to buy it for your baby simply because she turns one. (The advice about starting cow's milk on the first birthday comes from an earlier generation, when pediatricians recommended switching from cow's milk formula to cow's milk at 12 months old.)

**If your household avoids certain foods and you don't plan to have them around for your baby, make sure that other foods will provide your baby with all the nutrients she'll need.** Look for alternative sources of calcium, iron, vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, and/or protein, depending on what you're leaving out.

## BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR

Even though your toddler and preschooler can eat virtually all the same healthy foods you do, **remember that they need to eat a little more often than just breakfast, lunch, and dinner.** Your child may benefit from a mid-morning snack, a mid-afternoon one, an after-preschool one, or even a bedtime (before teeth-brushing!) snack.

**Toddlers are renowned for not eating the same amount every day.** It's normal to be concerned that your child isn't eating enough, but it's typical for kids this age to have days when they're quite hungry, and others when they seem to have little appetite. Don't worry about how much your child eats in a day, but rather if she's eating enough in a week. Rather than calculating every nutrient, just try to feed your little one (and everyone else in the family!) a rainbow of fruits and vegetables. For instance, orange veggies like carrots and sweet potatoes tend to have plenty of vitamin A, while green ones like spinach and broccoli tend to have more folate and vitamin C.

**If there's a food group that you feel your toddler should eat more of, try giving that food as the "appetizer" at a meal.** For example, instead of serving the vegetables at the same time as the rest of the meal, try serving them first, when your child is the hungriest. If she fills up on them and doesn't have much appetite for the main course, she can always catch up on that favored food at another mealtime. (Note that this timing trick can also work well on adults!)

## CHANGES IN BOWEL MOVEMENTS

**Your baby's bowel movements will change in frequency, color, odor, and consistency once she starts eating solid food.** If she's been exclusively fed breast milk, her stool will no longer have that buttered-popcorn smell every time, but have a more unpleasant aroma. (This is another reason not to rush with the introduction of solid foods!) Depending on what she eats, there may even be bits of undigested food in the stool. This is normal and doesn't mean that you need to avoid giving her that food.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

### Breastfeeding:

<http://www.lli.org>

<http://med.stanford.edu/newborns/professional-education/breastfeeding.html>

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/>

### Formula:

<http://infantnutrition.org/faqs/>

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/infant-and-toddler-health/in-depth/infant-formula/art-20045782?pg=1>

### Allergies:

<http://www.peps.org/ParentResources/by-topic/baby-care/food-allergies-and-kids>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Food-Allergies-in-Children.aspx>

### Vegan and vegetarian diets:

<http://www.bbcgoodfood.com/howto/guide/vegan-diet-healthy-kids>

<http://wholesomebabyfood.momtastic.com/meat-vegetarian-protein-baby-food.htm>