

# Weaning made easy

moving from milk to family meals



**Health**  
Promotion  
Agency

# Weaning made easy

As a parent you want the best start for your baby. What your child eats and drinks is important for his/her health now and in the future.

The information in this leaflet may be quite different from what you have read before, or what your friends or family may tell you they did. New research is constantly being carried out into infant nutrition and the information and advice in this leaflet is based on up-to-date scientific evidence. It will help you make sure that your child is getting a good start. The questions and answers that follow should explain why this new advice is being offered.



## What's the best time to begin solid foods?

Based on current research, health experts recommend that babies should start solid foods from the age of **6 months**. All the nourishment your baby needs for the first 6 months comes from either breast milk or infant formula milk, but after 6 months they need more iron and nutrients than milk alone can provide. You should aim to gradually increase the variety and amount of solid foods so that by 12 months they have become the main part of your baby's diet. This will help your baby to grow and develop properly.

## Why has the advice changed?

The advice has changed as a result of new research into babies' growth and development. This has shown that up to 6 months of age, babies' digestive systems and kidneys are still developing. Weaning too soon may increase the risk of infections and allergies.

## What are the advantages of weaning later?

Weaning later may reduce the risk of asthma, eczema, digestive problems, allergies and obesity in later life. Weaning is also easier at 6 months. At this stage, your baby is more able to sit up and the reflex which makes smaller babies push food back out of their mouths is gone. You will be able to progress much more quickly from smooth to lumpier textures and finger foods.

## My baby was 4.5kg (10lb) at birth – won't he need solid food earlier?

It doesn't really matter what weight your baby was at birth – his digestive system and kidneys will still develop at the same rate as a smaller baby. There's no need to introduce solid food earlier just because he weighs more.

## My 5 month old baby seems very hungry – surely she needs to start on solids now?

The most common reasons mothers give for starting weaning early are that their baby seemed especially hungry or had begun waking up at night again after a period of sleeping through. Babies have several growth spurts in the first few months when they need more calories and nutrients than usual. This doesn't mean they need to start on solid food – extra breast or formula milk will be adequate to meet these needs. Growth spurts don't usually last very long and babies generally settle down again afterwards. Research has also shown that introducing solid food has virtually no impact on how long a baby sleeps.

## My older sister weaned her children at 4 months and they're fine – why can't I?

Weaning from 4 months was the advice given for a number of years, but the new guideline of 6 months is based on more recent research and has been endorsed by health promotion bodies including the World Health Organization and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. You may not see an immediate difference in your child's health, compared to other babies that are weaned earlier, but you can be confident that you are giving your child the best chance to have good health throughout their life.

If you choose not to follow this advice, then make sure you use the separate weaning advice on page 22, as there are some foods that your baby should definitely never be given before 6 months. **You should never wean before 4 months (17 weeks).**

If your baby was born prematurely, ask your paediatrician, health visitor or paediatric dietitian for advice about what is best for your baby.

### References:

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. *Information for health professionals on infant feeding*. Belfast: DHSSPS, 2004.

Chief Medical Officer, Chief Nursing Officer. *Recommendations on breastfeeding duration and weaning*. 2004.



# Hints for successful weaning

- Allow plenty of time for feeding, particularly at first. Until now your baby has only known food that comes in a continuous flow from a nipple or teat. Your baby needs to learn to move solid food from the front of the tongue to the back in order to swallow it. The food tastes and feels different – it's bound to take time. Choose a time of day when you are both relaxed.
- **Never add any foods to your baby's bottle (this includes rusks) as this can cause choking and can damage teeth.**
- Make sure everything you use for feeding your baby is really clean (if you have decided to wean before your baby is 6 months old then, where possible, equipment should also be sterilised). Put a small amount of food in a suitable container and heat this, rather than heating a large amount that may go to waste. You can always heat up more if it is needed. Heat food thoroughly and allow it to cool, stir well and test before offering it to your baby. This is especially important if you are using a microwave. Throw away any food your baby hasn't eaten as it is not safe to reheat previously warmed food.
- **Always stay with your baby when he/she is eating to make sure he/she doesn't choke.**
- Do not rush or 'force feed': Most babies know when they've had enough to eat. Don't spend a lot of time persuading your baby to take food – they soon learn that refusing food is a good way of getting attention, or of getting a sugary pudding instead of a savoury course. Of course it's right to give attention, chat and enjoy meals together, but when food is refused it might be best to call an end to the meal.
- When your baby shows an interest in feeding him or herself, this is a good sign. Encourage this by giving your baby a spoon and helping him/her to load it with food. It'll take a while for your baby to get the hang of this, so you'll need to keep offering food from another spoon in the meantime.

- Bought weaning foods can be useful, but don't let them replace your own cooking. Try to use packets, tins or jars as little as possible and make sure you follow the instructions carefully. Family foods offer a greater range of tastes and textures, and will help to get your baby used to the taste of home-made meals. They're also less expensive and you know exactly what the ingredients are.
- Mashed foods can be frozen in a covered ice cube tray in the freezer. One or two cubes can then be defrosted as required. As your baby begins to eat more, you may find plastic food tubs with lids useful for freezing larger amounts of food.
- By the age of one you want your baby to be eating a variety of foods and to have adapted to your pattern of eating – three meals a day with a drink at each meal and two or three additional snacks. Offering a wide variety of foods at this stage will encourage your child to eat a varied, balanced diet.



# Getting started – from 6 months

This advice is appropriate if you are weaning your baby at about 6 months. If you are thinking of weaning earlier than this, remember that health experts agree that weaning at around 6 months is the healthiest option for all babies. If you still want to wean your baby early, follow the separate advice on page 22 to minimise the risks.

The idea of weaning is to introduce your baby gradually to a wider range of foods, so that by the age of 1 year your baby will be joining in family meals. All babies are different. Some take to it quickly, some take longer. Some are more choosy and may need a new food offered several times before it is accepted.

There is no best time of day to offer first solid foods – choose a quiet time when your baby isn't too hungry. Offer a small amount of food before or after a milk feed, or in the middle of the feed if that works better.

Don't be surprised if your baby doesn't want the solid food at first – this is perfectly normal. Wait until the next mealtime and try again. The main aim at this stage is to get your baby used to the idea of taking food from a spoon and experiencing different tastes and textures. Continue to give your baby the usual amount of breast or infant formula milk, as most of the nourishment he/she needs will still be coming from this.

## Suitable foods for the first couple of weeks:

- plain baby rice mixed with baby's usual milk;
- smooth or well mashed cooked carrot, parsnip, potato, turnip or cauliflower;
- smooth or well mashed banana, stewed apple, tinned pear or tinned apricots (in natural juice);
- unsweetened custard (made using custard powder);
- plain/natural yogurt.

## The texture of first spoon feeds



Above: Baby rice mixed with milk

Below: Stewed apple



### The texture of first spoon feeds



Above: Well mashed carrot

Below: Well mashed potato



### Weaning foods should not contain salt or sugar.

At first your baby may be content with only 1-2 teaspoons of mashed food. Use a plastic weaning spoon and half fill it. As your baby learns to take food from a spoon, you will need to increase the amount of solid food you offer. At the same time you will increase the number of spoon feeds each day to 2 and then 3 feeds.

Pasteurised whole cow's milk can be used to mix into foods such as mashed potato and breakfast cereal, but should not be given as a main drink until after 1 year.

### Foods to avoid giving your baby

- **Salt.** Do not add any salt to foods for babies as their kidneys are not fully developed. When you're cooking for the family, leave out the salt so your baby can share family meals. You should also avoid foods that contain a lot of salt, eg packet soups, stock cubes, crisps, bacon, smoked meats.
- **Sugar.** Do not add sugar to the food or drinks you give your baby. Sugar could encourage a sweet tooth and lead to tooth decay when the first teeth start to come through.
- **Honey.** Don't give honey until your child is 1 year old, even for easing coughs. Honey can contain a type of bacteria which can produce toxins in the baby's intestines and can cause a very serious illness (infant botulism). After the age of 1, the baby's intestine matures and the bacteria are not able to grow, but bear in mind that honey is also a sugar and can cause the same problems, such as tooth decay.
- **Nuts.** Whole nuts of any kind are unsuitable for children under the age of 5 years because of the risk of choking.

Products containing peanuts are safe for most children. If there is a history of conditions such as asthma, eczema or hay fever in the family (ie parents, brothers or sisters), foods containing peanuts such as peanut butter should be avoided until the age of 3 years.

## Moving on – after the first couple of weeks

As your baby gets used to the first foods, begin to add different foods and different tastes. At this stage you don't need to make the food quite so runny. You'll be able to use lots of the foods you already cook for yourself, for example:

- mashed or minced meat or chicken;
- fish, eg cod (with bones removed), tuna, sardines (well mashed);
- mashed lentils (dahl) or split pulses, hummus;
- mashed hard boiled egg;
- smooth peanut butter (see note about nuts, page 8);
- foods made from wheat, eg bread, pasta, semolina;
- breakfast cereals, such as plain Ready Brek, Weetabix, porridge.

*serve with mashed potatoes, rice or pasta and mashed vegetables*

If you are weaning your child onto a vegetarian diet, see also page 18 for additional suggestions.

If you aren't breastfeeding, this is a good time to introduce a cup for drinks of infant formula milk or water. You may find that your baby only manages small amounts initially, but this is a good start. The earlier a cup is introduced, the quicker he/she will adapt to using it.



## Iron

Try to give your baby a variety of foods rich in iron every day, eg beef, pork, lamb, sardines, egg yolk, green vegetables, beans, peas, lentils, fortified breakfast cereals.

Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron so it is important to include some foods rich in vitamin C at mealtimes. Vitamin C is found in unsweetened pure orange juice (diluted 1 part juice to 10 parts water), tomato and fresh fruit, eg kiwi, orange. This is particularly important if you are weaning your baby onto a vegetarian diet.

## Finger foods and lumps

Encourage your baby to chew by giving foods that have a few soft lumps. Most babies can start to chew soft lumps, such as mashed baked beans, rice pudding or minced or finely chopped meat, from 6 months even if they have no teeth. Babies are able to cope better with lumps if they are introduced early. This is really important for the development of speech muscles.



Finger foods provide chewing practice and encourage babies to feed themselves. These can also be given from 6 months. Suitable finger foods include toast, bread, pitta bread or chapatti, peeled apple, banana, raw or cooked green beans, carrot sticks or sticks of cheese. Avoid biscuits and rusks so that your baby does not get into the habit of expecting sweet snacks. Even low-sugar rusks contain sugar.

This may seem like you're moving on quite quickly, but you'll be surprised at how fast your baby can progress – this is one of the benefits of waiting till 6 months to start weaning. Some mothers worry about their babies choking on lumps, but in fact a baby is more likely to choke on liquid than food, so as long as you always supervise your baby eating, there's no need to be concerned.

If you delay giving 'lumpy' or finger foods, you may find that your baby refuses to eat 'lumpy' foods as they get older.

**Always stay with your baby during feeding to give encouragement and to make sure he/she doesn't choke.**

## From about 7 months

From about 7 months you can just use a fork to mash the food. By this stage your baby should be having 3 spoon feeds a day.

You will find that as your baby eats more solid food, his/her milk intake will start to decrease. Once he/she is on 3 meals a day, you can begin to reduce the amount of milk you give, but your baby should still be having breast milk on demand or 500-600ml (16-20 fl oz) of infant formula a day. Try to follow your baby's appetite and go at your baby's pace.

### The texture of spoon feeds from about 7 months



Above: Minced beef



Above: Mashed peas

## About teeth

It's never too early to protect your baby's teeth.

- Begin to brush teeth every day as soon as they appear, using a baby toothbrush and a small smear of fluoride toothpaste.
- Don't offer food and drinks that are high in sugar between meals.
- Drinks from a cup are less damaging for teeth. By the age of 1 your child should no longer be drinking from a bottle.

Fluoride can help to protect your baby's teeth. Fluoride drops are suitable for children from 6 months onwards – ask your dentist's advice about whether your baby should have them.



# From 9 months

At this stage your baby will move on from mashed to chopped foods. Remember that babies need fat for the concentrated calories it provides – you should not be applying adult healthy eating guidelines to your baby's diet. Continue to give breastfeeds or about 500-600ml (16-20 fl oz) of infant formula milk each day. Water or very dilute pure fruit juice can be given as a drink at mealtimes. By now, most drinks other than breast milk should be given from a cup. Encourage your baby to eat a wide variety of foods. By eating as a family your baby can learn to enjoy mealtimes.

## Some meal ideas to try

### Breakfast:

- unsweetened breakfast cereal with breast, formula or whole cow's milk;
- toast with well-cooked egg – scrambled, poached or boiled.

### Lunch:

- baked beans with fingers of toast;
- sandwiches filled with tuna, chopped chicken or ham;
- soup with a sandwich;
- pasta shapes in tomato sauce with grated cheese, served with crusty bread;
- pizza with chopped fresh tomato.

### Dinner:

- minced or chopped meat, mashed potatoes and carrots;
- fish fingers, peas and mashed potatoes;
- chicken casserole and rice;
- lasagne with broccoli;
- vegetable risotto with grated cheese;
- beef burgers or lentil burgers, courgettes, tomato slices and boiled potatoes;
- cauliflower cheese, boiled potatoes and green beans.

### Dessert:

- pieces of fresh soft fruit, eg pear, banana, melon;
- stewed fruit, eg apples, apricots, prunes (with stones removed);
- tinned soft fruit in its own juice, eg strawberries, peaches, pears;
- milk pudding, yogurt or fromage frais (do not use 'diet' varieties).

## Treats and snacks

Foods and drinks high in sugar, eg sweets, cream or chocolate biscuits and juices, are most damaging to teeth when they are taken between meals. This doesn't mean that they should never be taken, but they are less damaging to teeth if they are taken at the end of meals.

**Healthy snacks to use between meals include:**

- chopped fruit and vegetables, eg peeled apple, pear, peach, banana, orange, carrot, cucumber;
- bread, toast, scones, pancakes;
- natural yogurt or plain fromage frais – add your own fruit for extra flavour;
- cheese.

**Snacks that contain quite a lot of sugar should only be given occasionally between meals. These include:**

- flavoured yogurt, flavoured fromage frais;
- plain biscuits, eg Rich Tea, Marie, digestive.



# Weaning at a glance

## At 6 months

- This is the time to start weaning.
- Start off with a small amount of well mashed food.
- Continue to give the usual amount of breast or infant formula milk.

## After a couple of weeks:

- Begin to add different foods and tastes.
- The food doesn't need to be quite so runny – you can start to leave a few soft lumps.
- Increase the number of spoon feeds to 2 or 3 a day.
- Introduce finger foods at this stage.
- Introduce a cup for drinks.

## About 7 months

- Just use a fork to mash foods.
- By this stage you should be giving 3 meals a day and your baby should be eating more at each spoon feed.
- Once your baby is on 3 meals a day, you can begin to reduce the amount of milk you give – continue to breastfeed on demand or give at least 500-600ml (16-20 fl oz) of formula milk.

## From 9 months

- Continue to give 3 meals a day plus snacks.
- Move on from mashed to chopped foods.
- Offer your baby a wide variety of foods.
- Continue to breastfeed on demand or give at least 500-600ml (16-20 fl oz) of formula milk.

# What about drinks?

## **Breast milk or infant formula milk**

This should be the main drink for your baby during the first year, or longer if your child is vegan or vegetarian – see page 18 for details.

## **Follow-on formula**

This is not necessary and is unsuitable for infants under 6 months.

## **Cow's milk**

Whole cow's milk should not be used as the main drink until after 1 year. If your child is eating a varied diet, semi-skimmed milk may be given from 2 years. Skimmed milk should not be given to children under 5 years.



### **Other drinks**

A little cooled boiled tap water can be given if your baby seems very thirsty (after 6 months, water straight from the mains tap is suitable). If used, fruit juice should be very dilute (1 part pure orange juice to 10 parts water), given from a cup and limited to mealtimes.

### **Drinks that are not recommended**

#### **Baby juices, baby herbal drinks**

These contain sugar and can damage developing teeth if they are used frequently or given from a bottle.

#### **Sugary diluting squashes**

These contain sugar and can damage developing teeth. If used, they should be very well diluted and given from a cup.

### **Drinks that should not be given**

#### **Colas, lemonades and fizzy drinks including 'diet' drinks and sugar-free squashes**

These are acidic and can cause damage to teeth. 'Diet' drinks and sugar-free squashes are also high in artificial sweeteners which are unsuitable for babies and children.

#### **Tea and coffee**

These may reduce the amount of iron the body absorbs from food.

#### **Bottled waters**

These may contain high levels of minerals which make them unsuitable for babies. Fizzy bottled water is acidic and so may also damage teeth.

#### **Goat's and sheep's milk**

These lack essential vitamins and minerals needed for babies' growth and development.

# Weaning on to a vegetarian diet

Weaning your baby on to a vegetarian diet means you will need to take extra care to make sure your baby gets all the protein, vitamins, iron and other minerals needed.

Vegan mothers who are breastfeeding must ensure that they take an adequate amount of vitamin B12 supplement, as requirements increase during pregnancy and breastfeeding. You can obtain further information and advice from your health professional or the Vegan Society ([www.vegansociety.com](http://www.vegansociety.com)).



You can continue to breastfeed your baby for as long as you want. Babies who are being weaned on a vegetarian diet should be given breast milk or a suitable infant formula milk until they are 2 years old (up to 5 years for vegan children). From 6 months this should be given from a cup. See also the section on vitamin supplements on page 21.

## Alternatives for meat, chicken and fish

Some of the alternatives listed below should be included every day:

- mashed pulses such as lentils, peas, beans, eg red lentils, chick peas (if you decide to wean before 6 months these are the **only** foods from this list that can be used);
- tahini – sesame seed paste;
- finely ground nuts (unless there is a family history of allergy – see note about nuts page 8);
- well-cooked eggs – the white and yolk should be solid;
- tofu;
- soya protein (TVP);
- mashed/minced quorn.

Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron from these foods so it is important to include fruit, vegetables or well diluted, unsweetened pure orange juice at mealtimes (babies under 6 months should not be given citrus fruits or juices).

# Fussy eaters

It is quite normal for a baby to refuse food occasionally. Below are some suggestions on how to cope with a fussy eater.

- Avoid frequent snacks between meals and ensure that your baby is not drinking continually throughout the day – both of these can reduce your baby's appetite for main meals.
- Keep to regular mealtimes – children need routine.
- Keep portions small – babies cannot eat large amounts of food at a time.
- Don't become anxious if your baby refuses food – just clear away the food calmly and dispose of it. Don't offer an alternative – just wait until the next meal or snack.
- If a food is refused, try it again a few days later – it may take several attempts before your baby will accept it.
- Make sure there are no distractions, eg toys, television.
- **Never force your baby to eat.**

For most children this will be a passing phase, so try not to worry unnecessarily. However, if you're really worried about your child's eating habits, for example if they are losing weight, talk to your GP or health visitor, or ask to see a registered dietitian.

# Vitamin supplements

Until the age of 6 months your baby will get all the vitamins needed from breast milk or infant formula milk. As your baby grows, the amount of vitamins needed increases.

All babies need extra vitamins A and D from around 6 months. These extra vitamins are already added to infant formula milk, so bottle fed babies who are having at least 500ml (16 fl oz) of formula milk per day will not need vitamin supplements until they are 1 year old. Breastfed babies should be given vitamins A and D as supplements from 6 months onwards.

It is hard to ensure that young children eat a varied diet, so between the ages of 1 and 5 it is recommended that supplements of vitamins A and D are given. Check with your health visitor.

**It is essential that all children following a vegan diet are given supplements of vitamin B12 and riboflavin.**



# Weaning between 4–6 months

Weaning before 6 months is not recommended. However, if you choose to wean before 6 months a number of foods should be avoided as these are more likely to upset your baby or cause allergies. **You should never wean before 4 months (17 weeks).** Continue to breastfeed on demand or to give your baby the usual amount of infant formula milk (at least 600ml or 20 fl oz).

## Foods which must be avoided before 6 months:

- **Foods which contain gluten**, eg wheat flour, bread, breakfast cereals made from wheat, rusks, spaghetti or other pastas (eg tinned pasta in tomato sauce).
- **Nuts and seeds including ground nuts**, peanut butter and other nut spreads (see note about nuts, page 8).
- **Eggs.**
- **Cow's milk** can't be used as a drink or mixed with weaning foods at this stage.
- **Fish and shellfish.**
- **Citrus fruits** including citrus fruit juices, eg orange juice.
- **Soft and unpasteurised cheeses.**
- **Salt**
- **Sugar** } see notes on page 8.
- **Honey** }
- **For suitable vegetarian and vegan alternatives to meat and fish**, see page 18.

If you decide to wean your baby before 6 months, start with a teaspoonful of a suitable food (see across) mixed to a smooth, thin consistency. Offer it to your baby before or after a milk feed, or in the middle of the feed if that works better. If the food is hot, make sure you **stir it well** and **test the temperature** before giving it to your baby.

All equipment for spoon feeding must be very clean and should also be sterilised until your baby is 6 months old.

### **Suitable first foods:**

- plain baby rice;
- puréed potato, carrot, parsnip, turnip, cauliflower;
- puréed banana, stewed fruits, eg apple, pear, apricots.

### **As your baby gets used to spoon feeds**

As your baby gets used to taking foods from a spoon, other foods can be offered, eg:

- puréed beef, pork, lamb, chicken;
- puréed peas, green beans, lentils;
- puréed broccoli, Brussels sprouts, spinach.

If you are weaning your child on to a vegetarian diet see page 18.

Meat and poultry should be well cooked, eg in a stew, then puréed with the cooking juices. Don't add salt or stock cubes when cooking food.

Gradually increase spoon feeds to 2 to 3 times a day. The amount you give should be guided by your baby's appetite. It is important to move from puréed to mashed and more lumpy foods as your baby gets used to taking foods from a spoon.

**From 6 months you need to introduce a number of other foods to ensure that your baby gets all the vitamins and minerals needed for healthy growth and development.**

**It is essential that you begin to introduce new foods and textures as explained in pages 7 to 14.**



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