

# Starting Solid Foods

Adapted from *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5*



Until now, your baby's diet has been made up of breast milk and/or formula. But once your child reaches 4 to 6 months of age, you can begin adding solid foods. This brochure has been developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics to give parents information on how to introduce solid foods to their infants. The information in this brochure is based on the Academy's parenting manual *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5*.

## When can my baby eat solid foods?

Most babies are ready to eat solid foods at 4 to 6 months of age. Before this age, most babies do not have enough control over their tongues and mouth muscles. Instead of swallowing the food, they push their tongues against the spoon or the food. This tongue-pushing reflex helps babies when they are nursing or drinking from a bottle. Most babies lose this reflex at about 4 months of age. Energy needs of babies increase around this age as well, making this an ideal time to introduce solids.

You may start solid foods at any feeding. At first you may want to pick a time when you do not have many distractions. However, keep in mind that as your child gets older, she will want to eat with the rest of the family.

## Feeding your baby solid foods

To prevent choking, make sure your baby is sitting up when you introduce solid foods. If your baby cries or turns away when you give him the food, do not force the issue. It is more important that you both enjoy mealtimes than for your baby to start solids by a specific date. Go back to nursing or bottle-feeding exclusively for a week or two, then try again.

It is important for your baby to get used to the process of eating — sitting up, taking bites from a spoon, resting between bites, and stopping when full. Always use a spoon to feed your baby solid foods. Some parents try putting solid foods in a bottle or infant feeder with a nipple. This is not a good idea. Feeding your baby this way can cause choking. It also greatly increases the amount of food your baby eats and can cause your baby to gain too much weight. These early experiences will help your child learn good eating habits throughout life.

## How to start

Start with half a spoonful or less and talk to your baby through the process ("Mmm, see how good this is!"). Your baby may not know what to do at first. She may look confused or insulted, wrinkle her nose, roll the food around her mouth, or reject it altogether. This is a normal reaction, because her feedings have been so different up to this point.

One way to make eating solids for the first time easier is to give your baby a little milk first, then switch to very small half-spoonfuls of food, and finish with more milk. This will prevent your baby from getting frustrated when she is very hungry.

Do not be surprised if most of the first few solid-food feedings wind up on your baby's face, hands, and bib. Increase the amount of food gradually, with just a teaspoonful or two to start. This allows your baby time to learn how to swallow solids.

## What kinds of foods should my baby eat?

For most babies it does not matter what the first solid foods are. Many pediatricians recommend cereals first. The first cereals usually are offered in this order:

- Rice cereal
- Oatmeal cereal
- Barley cereal

It is a good idea to give your baby wheat and mixed cereals last, because they may cause allergic reactions in very young babies.

You can use premixed baby cereals in a jar or dry cereals to which you add breast milk, formula, or water. The premixed foods may be easier to use, but the dry ones are richer in iron and allow you to control the thickness of the cereal. Whichever type of cereal you choose, make sure that it is made for babies. Only baby foods contain the extra nutrients your child needs at this age.

Once your baby learns to eat one food, gradually give him other foods such as

- Infant cereals
- Fruit
- Strained vegetables
- Meat

Give your baby eggs last, because they occasionally cause allergic reactions. Babies are born with a preference for sweets. The order of introducing foods does not change this.

### **Warning: do not home-prepare beets, turnips, carrots, spinach, or collard greens**

In some parts of the country, these vegetables have large amounts of nitrates, chemicals that can cause an unusual type of anemia (low blood count) in young infants. Baby food companies are aware of this problem and screen the produce they buy for nitrates. They also avoid buying these vegetables in parts of the country where nitrates have been found. Because you cannot test for this chemical yourself, it is safer to use commercially prepared forms of these foods, especially while your child is an infant. If you choose to prepare them at home anyway, serve them fresh and do not store them. Storage of these foods may actually increase the amount of nitrates in them.

Give your baby one new food at a time, and wait at least 2 to 3 days before starting another. After each new food, watch for any allergic reactions such as diarrhea, rash, or vomiting. If any of these occur, stop using the new food and talk with your pediatrician.

Within 2 or 3 months of starting solid foods, your baby's daily diet should include the following foods each day:

- Breast milk or formula
- Cereal
- Vegetables
- Meats
- Fruits

## Finger foods

Once your baby can sit up and bring her hands or other objects to her mouth, you can give her finger foods to help her learn to feed herself. To avoid choking, make sure anything you give your child is soft, easy to swallow, and cut into small pieces. Some examples include small pieces of banana, wafer-type cookies, or crackers; and well-cooked and cut-up yellow squash, peas, and potatoes. Do not give your baby any food that requires chewing at this age.

At each of your child's daily meals, she should be eating about 4 ounces, or the amount in one small jar of strained baby food. (Do not give your child foods that are made for adults. These foods often have added salt and preservatives.)

If you want to give your baby fresh food, use a blender or food processor, or just mash softer foods with a fork. All fresh foods should be cooked with no added salt or seasoning. Though you can feed your baby raw bananas (mashed), most other fruits and vegetables should be cooked until they are soft. Refrigerate any food you do not use and look for any signs of spoilage before giving it to your baby. Fresh foods are not bacteria-free, so they will spoil more quickly than food from a can or jar.

## What can I expect after my baby starts solids?

When your child starts eating solid foods, his stools will become more solid and variable in color. Due to the added sugars and fats, they will have a much stronger odor too. Peas and other green vegetables may turn the stool a deep-green color; beets may make it red. (Beets sometimes make urine red as well.) If your baby's meals are not strained, his stools may contain undigested pieces of food, especially hulls of peas or corn, and the skin of tomatoes or other vegetables. All of this is normal. Your child's digestive system is still immature and needs time before it can fully process these new foods. If the stools are extremely loose, watery, or full of mucus, however, it may mean the digestive tract is irritated. In this case, reduce the amount of solids and let him build a tolerance for them a little more slowly. If the stools continue to be loose, watery, or full of mucus, consult your pediatrician to see if your child has a digestive problem.

## Should I give my baby juice?

Babies do not need juice. Babies less than 6 months of age should not be given juice. However, if you choose to give your baby juice, do so only after she is 6 months of age and offer it only in a cup, not in a bottle. Limit juice intake to no more than 4 ounces a day and offer it only with a meal or snack. Any more than this can fill up your baby, giving her less of an appetite for other, more nutritious foods, including breast milk or formula. Too much juice also can cause diaper rash, diarrhea, or excessive weight gain. To help prevent tooth decay, avoid putting your child to bed with a bottle.

Give your child extra water if she seems to be thirsty between feedings. During the hot months when your child is losing fluid through sweat, offer water two or more times a day. If you live in an area where the water is fluoridated, these feedings also will help prevent future tooth decay.

## Junior foods

When your child reaches about 8 months of age, you may want to introduce "junior" foods. These are slightly coarser than strained foods and are packaged in larger jars — usually 6 to 8 ounces. They require more chewing than baby foods. You also can expand your baby's diet to include soft foods such as puddings, mashed potatoes, yogurt, and gelatin. As always, introduce one food at a time, then wait 2 or 3 days before trying something else to be sure your child does not develop an allergic reaction.

As your baby's ability to use his hands improves, give him his own spoon and let him play with it at mealtimes. Once he has figured out how to hold the spoon, dip it in his food and let him try to feed himself. But do not expect much in the beginning, when more food is bound to go on the floor and high chair than into his mouth. A plastic cloth under his chair will help minimize some of the cleanup.

Be patient, and resist the temptation to take the spoon away from him. For a while you may want to alternate bites from his spoon with bites from a spoon that you hold. Your child may not be able to use a spoon on his own until after his first birthday. Until then, you may want to fill the spoon for your child but leave the actual feeding to him. This can help decrease the mess and waste.

Good finger foods for babies include the following:

- Crunchy toast
- Well-cooked pasta
- Small pieces of chicken
- Scrambled egg
- Ready-to-eat cereals
- Small pieces of banana

Offer a variety of flavors, shapes, colors, and textures, but always watch your child for choking in case he bites off a piece that is too big to swallow.

## Choosing a high chair

Select a chair with a wide base, so it cannot be tipped over if someone bumps against it.

If the chair folds, be sure it is locked each time you set it up.

Whenever your child sits in the chair, use the safety straps. This will prevent your child from slipping down and causing serious injury or even death. Never allow your child to stand in the high chair.

Do not place the high chair near a counter or table. Your child may be able to push hard enough against these surfaces to tip the chair over.

Never leave a young child alone in a high chair and do not allow older children to climb or play on it, as this could tip it over.

A high chair that hooks on to a table is not a good substitute for a more solid one. If you plan to use this type of chair when you eat out or when you travel, look for one that locks on to the table. Be sure the table is heavy enough to support your child's weight without tipping. Also, check to see whether your child's feet can touch a table support. If your child pushes against the table, it may dislodge the seat.

Because children often swallow without chewing, do not offer children younger than 4 years of age the following foods:

- Chunks of peanut butter
- Nuts and seeds
- Popcorn
- Raw vegetables
- Hard, gooey, or sticky candy
- Chewing Gum

Other firm, round foods like grapes, cooked carrots, hot dogs, meat sticks (baby food “hot dogs”), or chunks of cheese or meat always should be cut into **very small** pieces. Before cutting a hot dog, remove the slippery peel.

## Good eating habits start early

Babies and small children do not know what foods they need to eat. Your job as a parent is to offer a good variety of healthy foods. Watch your child for cues that she has had enough to eat. Do not overfeed!

Begin to build good eating habits. Usually eating five to six times a day (three meals and two to three snacks) is a good way to meet toddlers' energy needs. Children who “graze,” or eat constantly, may never really feel hungry. They can have problems from eating too much or too little.

If you are concerned that your baby is *already* overweight, talk with your pediatrician before making any changes to her diet. During these months of rapid growth, your baby needs a balanced diet that includes fat, carbohydrates, and protein. It is not wise to switch a baby under 2 years of age to skim milk, for example, or to other low-fat substitutes for breast milk or formula. A better solution might be to slightly reduce the amount of food your child eats at each meal. This way, your child will continue to get the balanced diet she needs.

Your pediatrician will help you determine if your child is overfed, not eating enough, or eating too many of the wrong kinds of foods. Because prepared baby foods have no added salt, you do not have to worry about salt at this age. However, be aware of the eating habits of others in your family. As your baby eats more and more “table foods,” she will imitate the way you eat, including using salt and nibbling on snacks. For your child's sake as well as your own, cut your salt use and watch how much fat you consume. Provide a good role model by eating a variety of healthy foods.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

## From your doctor

