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“Feeding Your 4- to 7-Month-Old”

www.kidshealth.org

This is the time when most infants are introduced to solid foods. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) currently recommends gradually introducing solid foods when a baby is about 6 months old. Your doctor, however, may recommend starting as early as 4 months depending on your baby's readiness and nutritional needs. Be sure to check with your doctor before starting any solid foods.

Your baby may take a little while to "learn" how to eat solids. During these months you'll still be providing the usual feedings of breast milk or formula, so don't be concerned if your baby refuses certain foods at first, or doesn't seem very interested in food. It may just take some time.

Is My Child Ready to Eat Solids?

How can you tell if your baby is ready for solids? Here are a few hints:

- Is your baby's tongue-thrust reflex gone or diminished? This reflex, which prevents infants from choking on foreign objects, also causes them to push food out of their mouths.
- Can your baby support his or her own head? To eat solid food, an infant needs good head and neck control and should be able to sit up.
- Is your baby interested in food? A 6-month-old baby who stares and grabs at your food at dinnertime is clearly ready for some variety in the food department.

If your doctor gives the go-ahead but your baby seems frustrated or uninterested as you're introducing solid foods, try waiting a few days or even weeks before trying again. Since solids are only a supplement at this point, breast milk and formula will still fill your baby's basic nutritional needs.

How Should I Start Feeding My Baby Solids?

When your baby is ready and the doctor has given you the OK to try solid foods, pick a time of day when your baby is not tired or cranky. You want your baby to be a little hungry, but not all-out starving; you might want to let your baby breastfeed a while, or provide part of the usual bottle. Have your baby sit supported in your lap or in an upright infant seat. Infants, who sit well, usually around 6 months, can be placed in a high chair with a safety strap.

Typically, a baby's first food is a little iron-fortified infant rice cereal mixed with breast milk or formula. The first feeding may be nothing more than a little cereal mixed in a whole lot of liquid. Place the spoon near your baby's lips, and let the baby smell and taste. Don't be surprised if this

first spoonful is rejected. Wait a minute and try again. Most food offered to your baby at this age will end up on the baby's chin, bib, or high-chair tray. Again, this is just an introduction.

Do not add cereal to your baby's bottle unless your child's doctor instructs you to do so, as this can cause babies to become overweight and doesn't help the baby learn how to eat solid foods.

Once your infant gets the hang of eating cereal off a spoon, it may be time to introduce a fruit or vegetable. When introducing new foods, go slow. Introduce one food at a time and wait several days before trying something else new. This will allow you to identify foods that your baby may be allergic to.

Foods to Avoid for Now

Some foods are generally withheld until later. Do not give eggs, cow's milk, citrus fruits and juices, and honey until after a baby's first birthday.

Eggs (especially the whites) may cause an allergic reaction, especially if given too early. Citrus is highly acidic and can cause painful diaper rashes for a baby. Honey may contain certain spores that, while harmless to adults, can cause botulism in babies. Regular cow's milk does not have the nutrition that infants need.

Fish and seafood, peanuts and peanut butter, and tree nuts are also considered allergenic for infants, and shouldn't be given until after the child is 2 or 3 years old, depending on whether the child is at higher risk for developing food allergies. A child is at higher risk for food allergies if one or more close family members have allergies or allergy-related conditions, like food allergies, eczema, or asthma.

Some possible signs of food allergy or allergic reactions include:

- rash
- bloating or an increase in intestinal gas
- diarrhea
- fussiness after eating

For more severe allergic reactions, like hives or breathing difficulty, get medical attention right away. If your child has any type of reaction to a food, don't offer that food until you talk with your child's doctor.

Tips for Introducing Solids

With the hectic pace of family life, most parents opt for commercially prepared baby foods at first. They come in small, convenient containers, and manufacturers must meet strict safety and nutrition guidelines. It's a good idea to avoid brands with added fillers and sugars.

If you do plan to prepare your own baby foods at home, pureeing them with a food processor or blender, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Protect your baby and the rest of your family from food borne illness by following the rules for food safety (including frequent hand washing).
- Try to preserve the nutrients in your baby's food by using cooking methods that retain the most vitamins and minerals. Try steaming or baking fruits and vegetables instead of boiling, which wash away the nutrients.
- Freeze portions that you aren't going to use right away rather than canning them.

- Avoid home-prepared beets, collard greens, spinach, and turnips. They can contain high levels of nitrates, which can cause anemia in infants. Serve jarred varieties of those vegetables.

Whether you buy the baby food or make it yourself, remember that texture and consistency are important. At first, babies should have finely pureed single foods. (Just applesauce, for example, not apples and pears mixed together.) After you've successfully tried individual foods, it's OK to offer a pureed mix of two foods. When your child is about 9 months old, coarser, chunkier textures are going to be tolerated as he or she begins transitioning to a diet that includes more table foods.

If you are using commercially prepared baby food in jars, spoon some of the food into a bowl to feed your baby. Do not feed your baby directly from the jar, because bacteria from the baby's mouth can contaminate the remaining food. It's also smart to throw away opened jars of baby food within a day or two.

Juice can be given after 6 months of age, which is also a good age to introduce your baby to a cup. Buy one with large handles and a lid (a "sippy cup"), and teach your baby how to maneuver and drink from it. You might need to try a few different cups to find one that works for your child. Use water at first to avoid messy clean-ups. Serve only 100% fruit juice, not juice drinks or powdered drink mixes. Do not give juice in a bottle and remember to limit the amount of juice your baby drinks to less than 4 total ounces (120 ml) a day. Too much juice adds extra calories without the nutrition of breast milk or formula. Drinking too much juice can contribute to overweight and can cause diarrhea.

Infants usually like fruits and sweeter vegetables, such as carrots and sweet potatoes, but don't neglect other vegetables. Your goal over the next few months is to introduce a wide variety of foods. If your baby doesn't seem to like a particular food, reintroduce it at subsequent meals. It may take quite a few tries before your child warms up to certain foods.