

Weaning your baby

Weaning is simply the introduction of solid food into your baby's diet. Before four months of age, babies are unable to properly digest any foods other than breast or formula milk. However, between the ages of four and six months, most babies are ready to start on some solids. At this point they require more iron and nutrients than milk can provide alone. It does not mean that they no longer need breast or formula milk although they will begin to reduce the amount they need as they replace a larger proportion of their nutrients with solid food.

Weaning can be a great cause for concern for parents, particularly parents who are weaning their first child. There is conflicting advice as to when you should wean and in addition to this there are varied views from parents as to what and how to approach the task. It should, however, not be looked upon as a stressful task, but a fun developmental stage with your child; one with plenty of mess and an often amusing, shared experience!

In 2001, the World Health Organisation said that babies should be exclusively breast fed for their first six months. However, a paper in the Archives of Disease in Childhood by Dr Martin Platt, a paediatrician at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in 2009 said there is no magic age to wean a baby. Further confusion has been created by a recent press release (14 January 2011) that suggested that there is new evidence indicating that exclusive milk feeding could put babies at risk of risk of allergies, food aversion and even obesity. The scientists behind the report also claim that babies can be given solids safely at least eight weeks earlier than present advice dictates. It transpires, however, that this 'report' was in fact not a new scientific study or a systematic review, but the authors review of selected past research, published in the 'Comment' section of the British Medical Journal. Three of the four authors receive funding from the baby food industry, whose marketing strategy is to encourage parents to move onto processed foods (purees and paps) from 4 months. The Department of Health was sticking by the WHO guidelines, but said it has asked scientists to consider all the evidence and report back later in the year.

So when to start?

In summary, the UK policy is to introduce complementary foods at around 6-months and progress responsively, in line with individual babies' progress and acceptance. Not all babies need solids at the same time: in every aspect of infant development there is a wide range of normal.

Babies do give clues about when they are ready to try solids – they show an interest in people eating, they can sit up and reach and chew on anything they can grab! They may also want to feed more and may wake more in the night to feed. Certainly resist weaning before 4 months and then follow your baby's clues and the advice of your health visitor.

What should you start with?

A few spoonfuls of mashed or pureed fruit (pear/cooked apple/banana), baby rice or pureed vegetables (carrot/parsnip/potato). All of these can be mixed with breast or formula milk to make it runny. Give

this to your baby with a soft baby spoon, once a day before moving onto two or three times a day within a few weeks.

How do you start?

Go at your baby's pace and be relaxed. Allow plenty of time for feeding, especially at first, and be prepared for mess – your baby needs to learn to move solid food from the front of the tongue to the back in order to swallow it as well as to accept new flavours. Always stay nearby when your baby is eating to ensure that he/she doesn't choke. Don't take your baby's rejection of your food personally, or worry that he/she will starve. If your baby is not interested in solids, do not persist – try again another day. It is good for your baby to learn about the texture and feel of foods – this is all part of their development. Therefore, try to be relaxed and allow them to put their fingers in their food and smear it over their faces. It is also good to try to include your baby in family meals and allow them to feed themselves.

'Baby-led weaning'

The practice of 'baby-led weaning' is becoming more widespread, where babies are allowed to play with appropriately prepared solid foods and decide for themselves when to eat. Experience in this area suggests that babies naturally start to ingest complementary foods at around 6 months of age, when various developmental factors (hand-eye coordination, mastication ability etc.) come together. Many parents find themselves following baby-led weaning without even thinking about it. This is particularly the case with second and later children who love to copy their older siblings and try to grab food from their older siblings' plates, happy to feed themselves just as their big brother or sister does.

Dietitians tend to think that it's important to give your baby a variety of textures, so sloppy foods on a spoon as well as finger foods.

Foods to avoid giving your baby

Do not give your baby **any** salt – therefore, remember not to add it during cooking. Their kidneys cannot cope with it. Avoid sugar – it can encourage a sweet tooth from an early age. Also avoid honey until your child is one – not only will it encourage a sweet tooth but occasionally it can contain a bacteria which can produce toxins in a baby's intestines and cause serious illness (infant botulism). Avoid nuts until your child is five in case of choking and allergy. You should also avoid following foods until your child is at least six-months old: Wheat-based foods that contain gluten; nuts and seeds; eggs; fish and shellfish; citrus fruits; soft and unpasteurised cheeses.