

Weaning

This article is aimed at families with a history of atopic symptoms such as eczema, asthma, hay fever, where food intolerance may play a part in their symptoms. By weaning carefully and noting any reactions as you go you may be able to minimise the impact of new foods on the immune system.

Weaning starts with offering your baby small amounts of solid food and finishes when your baby is eating three meals a day and able to drink from a cup and use a spoon. The main source of nutrition remains milk for a long time.

Every baby should be weaned when *they* are ready. Ideally a baby should be about six months old so that their digestive system and kidneys have matured enough to cope with solids. Signs that a baby is ready for weaning include starting to breast-feed every 2 hours over a period of 5 days when before they could go for longer; waking up for a feed after previously sleeping through the night; reaching 5.4kg/12lbs; first teeth coming through. This may mean that for some babies they are between 4 and 5 months old and some nearer 6 months. At six months a baby's reserves of iron and other nutrients start to run out and weaning should not be delayed beyond 8 months, especially if they are exclusively breast-fed.

If you wean too early they may gain weight too quickly, may be more prone to food intolerances, and may not get enough milk which should still be their main source of nutrients.

First Weaning foods

Initially the first foods are a top-up to milk and do not replace it. Introducing foods slowly allows you to reduce your breast milk without suffering engorgement.

Start gently, offering a spoon of solids once a day to allow the digestive system to get used to processing foods. Some babies like some of their milk first and will then try some solids followed by the rest of their milk. They are used to getting their milk quickly and may become stressed if they have to wait for it! As your baby becomes used to solids, gradually increase the amount you offer and then offer it twice a day until you are giving something three times a day.

Introduce foods one at a time leaving 3 or 4 days between each new food. Look out for any reactions as you introduce them. Ideally, keep a food diary and note anything such as a skin rash or eczema, excessive sleepiness, a runny nose, an ear infection, dark circles under the eyes, asthmatic breathing, hyperactivity, and excessive thirst. Stop the food last introduced and see if the symptoms go away. Try reintroducing it a few weeks later.

Start weaning with single fruit or vegetable purees, ideally organic. Choose from all vegetables except potatoes, peppers and aubergines (members of the deadly nightshade family); all fruits except tomatoes, berries and citrus (orange and lemon). Then try pure baby rice.

Foods should be smooth and bland in taste and should not contain salt, sugar or artificial flavourings. After about 1 or 2 months of mixed feeding (milk and solids), one milk feed can be replaced with a meal of solids and a drink of water.

Stage 2 (about 6 - 9 months)

Life can get a bit messy at this stage when finger foods are introduced and purees become lumpier to increase texture. Offer gluten free, sugar free rusks, small pieces of cooked carrot or cooked green beans, and small pieces of soft raw fruit such as banana or ripe pear as finger foods. Wheat based foods should be introduced **after 12 months**.

Always stay with your baby when giving finger foods to avoid any risk of choking.

You can now introduce organic meat, poultry and fish; apples, green vegetables (cabbage, broccoli, spinach); pulses (peas, beans, lentils); and small amounts of grains (other than wheat) such as millet, oats, barley to test gluten tolerance.

Their need for milk decreases, however ensure your baby drinks plenty of water, ideally from a cup or beaker.

Stage 3 (about 9 - 12 months)

Your baby may now be able to eat food that is only minced or chopped. Offer a wide variety of foods to expand their palate. Potatoes and tomatoes can now be introduced. Include soft potato, cubes of meat, and soft fruits as finger foods.

Over a year

By now they should be eating family meals, but don't worry if this is a bit later for your baby. Do not offer them fatty, spicy, salty or sugar foods. Slowly try your baby with: citrus fruit, wheat products, well cooked egg and dairy products (boil cows milk). Watch for any reactions as before.

Milk is still an important part of their diet and they should have at least a pint a day of formula, cow's milk or suitable milk substitute once no longer breast feeding until the age of 2 years.

Continue to avoid peanuts to reduce the risk of allergies.

Home-made v. commercial food

In the busy world we live in, there will be times when you will need to use commercial foods. Look for brands that are sugar and starch-free. Avoid anything containing: salt, sugar in any form (bad for developing teeth), modified starch or hydrolysed vegetable protein. If they contain cereals they should be unrefined and whole meal with no gluten before 6-9 months. Try taking a banana and avocado with you and mash them together when needed.

Starting them on the right foods sets the stage for healthy choices later in life. My youngest child at age 7, still only drinks water, eats sugary foods in moderation and loves fruit and vegetables! I hope you enjoy weaning your children as much as I have and if you feel you need any help with weaning or food intolerances I would love to meet you and your baby or child.