

Introducing solid foods

Generally, baby's tummies aren't ready for anything other than milk until they're around six months old, and the NHS guidelines advise to wait until your baby is six months old. Here are some things to look out for that show they're ready to have a go. They can sit up supported holding their head and neck upright for a few minutes and they're holding things in their hands and chewing on different objects.

How to make a start? Your baby should be happy and content and not had any milk for a couple of hours, so they will have some hunger starting. First tastes can be fruit, vegetable, mash, or cereal such as baby porridge. Start with a smooth consistency for the first couple of times to see how your baby handles solid food in their mouth. Premature babies may need to wean a little later depending on their development and prematurity. Speak to your public health nurse (health visitor) about weaning your premature baby. If they keep pushing the food out with their tongue they're not ready to wean. Try again in another week or two.

Once your baby has had a couple of tries with solid food and seems to enjoy it, then you can start to increase the texture of food and move to mashing with a fork. Your baby will learn to manage the food in their mouth and develop their chew and bite reflexes which are present between six to eight months old. You can give them solid items of food such as soft cooked carrots, yams (which are sweet potatoes), broccoli, cauliflower, plantain, and chapattis. Food which needs to be cooked should be soft to bite but not falling apart in baby's hand. Give your baby small amounts of finger food from starting weaning as it helps them with their hand and eye coordination, their bite and their chew. Over the next few months, their fine motor skills will improve with this practice. Parents often worry about their baby choking. You must watch your baby whilst they eat in case they choke. But this is rare. Babies can make a funny noise when eating which could be gagging. Gagging is a protective mechanism which means food returns to the mouth making a gagging sound, here the baby can either reswallow the right way or rechew it as it's too lumpy to swallow. All this is learned behaviour and with practice it will happen less and less.

Initially, your baby needs small portions of food alongside their normal amounts of milk. As solid foods increase in frequency and amount, you can change when you offer a milk drink. They will need one when they first wake in the morning and before bedtime. The other milk feeds will slowly be replaced by solid foods. Build up to offering three meals a day and offer a reduced amount of milk as the solids increase, until you're offering dairy foods instead of milk in their diet. 30 grams (1 ounce) of cheese, such as cheddar, is similar to 200 millilitres of milk. 2 small fromage frais or yogurt give the same as 150 millilitres of milk.

Offer foods you have as a family as much as possible instead of buying baby foods. You want your baby to eat what you eat, and it's cheaper. Manufactured baby food is convenient but often sweetened to make it taste better with sugars, fructose or apple juice which could mean your baby prefers sweeter things. Baby's food should be full fat, not low fat. They need the fat content for their energy and development.