

Weaning

During the first year, a baby grows more quickly than at any other time in his or her life. This rapid period of growth means that babies need a lot of energy and nutrients to ensure that they can grow well.

What is weaning?

Initially, babies only need breast milk, or a suitable formula milk, but, as they get older, they need to have other sources of nutrition to help with growth and development. Weaning is the introduction of solid foods into the diet of a baby who is drinking breast milk or formula milk. It is a gradual process but, by the time they are one year old, most children will be eating chopped, mashed family food.

Why should we wean children?

We need to wean children so they are able to get all of the nutrients they need from the foods they eat. Biting and chewing help to develop the muscles needed for speech development. At, or around, six months old, a child's body stores of some nutrients, such as iron, start to run out. Therefore, it is important that when cow's milk is introduced as the main drink at one year old, babies should be eating a varied diet, which meets their nutritional requirements.

When should I wean my child?

The Department of Health recommends exclusive breastfeeding until six months (26 weeks) of age. Weaning onto solid foods should start at around six months. Some parents, however, may wish to wean earlier, and four months (17 weeks) is the earliest age that weaning should be started. Babies who are born pre-term need to be weaned according to their individual needs, and advice should be sought from the dietitian and the medical team.

What kind of foods should be used?

Weaning foods are often introduced in stages. (See table overleaf). The ages are approximate and will



depend on when weaning is first started; every baby is different and will develop at his or her own pace. It is important to keep offering different tastes and textures through your baby's first year.

What about drinks?

Breast fed babies do not need any additional drinks, but formula fed babies may need some extra (cooled boiled) water in hot weather. There is no need for babies to be offered juices, as even juices with natural sugars can cause tooth decay. After six months, babies should be offered regular breast feeds. If they are being formula fed they should be offered 500-600ml of suitable infant formula.

Is it okay to use commercial baby foods?

It is best, and often great fun, for children to be weaned on to the foods that the family eat. Children who only eat commercial baby foods may not like family foods once they are offered. However, some commercial baby foods can be incorporated into the weaning diet, and many parents find them convenient.

Is it safe to wean onto a vegetarian or vegan diet?

Children can grow and develop normally on a vegetarian or vegan diet, although more attention needs to be given to ensure that nutritional needs are met. Vegetarian and vegan diets can be high in fibre, and this can lead to lower energy (calorie) intake, and reduced absorption of some important minerals, such as iron and zinc. Speak to your health visitor or a paediatric dietitian for advice on weaning onto a vegetarian or vegan diet.

Table of weaning stages

Babies are ready for solid foods when their digestive systems are developed enough to cope – this is usually at around six months. But every baby is an individual so if you think yours is ready earlier, speak to a member of your health visiting team.

Stage	Age range	Consistency	Food
1	Around six months	Thicker consistency with some lumps; soft finger foods can also be introduced at this stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fruit and vegetables rice, pasta, potatoes, yam, bread and cereals
2	Nine - twelve months	Mashed, chopped, minced consistency; more finger foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> meat, fish, pulses and eggs yoghurt, custard and cheese
3	Twelve months and older	Mashed, chopped family foods and a variety of finger foods.	

Which foods should be avoided?

Salt - up to seven months, a baby should eat less than 1g of salt per day (breastmilk and formula milks contain the right amount of salt). Between seven months and one year, 1g of salt per day is the maximum. Salt should not be added to foods, and salty foods, such as bacon, cheese and some processed foods, should be limited.

Sugar - avoid adding any sugar to foods and drinks for babies.

Honey - can contain bacteria which could lead to infant botulism, so it is best not to give it to children under one year old.

Nuts - can be given from around six months old, if they are finely ground. Children under five years old should not have whole nuts because of the risk of choking and inhalation.

Does my child need supplements?

The UK Health Departments recommend that all babies aged six months onwards should be given a supplement containing vitamins A, C and D, such as Healthy Start vitamin drops, unless they are drinking 500ml (about a pint) of infant formula a day (infant formula has vitamins added to it). You can continue to give young children a supplement containing vitamins A, C and D until they are five years old, as this will help to make sure that they are getting enough of these vitamins.

This is especially important when they are learning to eat a variety of foods and if they are selective eaters. Vegan children also need vitamin B12. If you didn't take vitamin D supplements throughout your pregnancy and are planning on breast feeding, your health visitor may advise giving your baby vitamin D from the age of one month.

Summary

Weaning is a crucial stage in your baby's development, but it can also be a fun one. Introducing new foods at the right time will help your baby develop and grow into a healthy child.

Further information: Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Breastfeeding and Children – Healthy Eating, are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

If you need more advice on weaning, speak to your health visitor, doctor or a dietitian.

This Food Factsheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian. If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or: www.freelancedietitians.org for a private dietitian.

To check your dietitian is registered check www.hcpc-uk.org

This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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