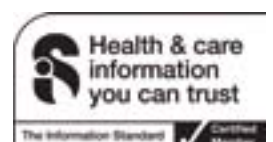


# Weaning your premature baby

The steps you can follow to introduce your baby to more solid foods



**Bliss**  
for babies born  
premature or sick



# Weaning your premature baby

**"After a very early arrival at 26+3 weeks, and 11 weeks in the neonatal unit, we found weaning to be a hugely positive experience. Every meal time feels like a further nutrition boost for our now not-so-little superhero!"**

**Rachel, mum to Charlie**

This information is about introducing your premature baby to more solid foods, and the steps you can follow as your baby moves from milk to eventually only eating solids. This is called weaning.

You may also hear people call it 'introducing complementary foods', 'complementary feeding' or 'starting pureed food'. These are different ways of describing adding more solid foods to your baby's diet.

The word 'weaning' can mean different things. Often, health professionals use it to mean a baby coming off oxygen when they are in the neonatal unit, or at home. We do not cover this topic in this information. For more information about breathing support, visit our [support pages](#).

We talk about weaning premature babies in this information. If your baby was born at term but sick you might also have questions and worries about weaning your baby. It is important that you always speak with your health professional for advice, as your baby's care will be very specific to their condition, how well they are currently, and many other factors which must be taken into account. However, a lot of the information here – in particular the signs that your baby is ready to start weaning and how you can approach starting to wean your baby – will also be relevant for babies born at term.

If you have any questions about weaning before you start, and would like specific advice tailored for you and your baby, do talk to your GP, dietitian, health visitor or consultant. This may be most relevant for babies born very prematurely.

## How will this information help me?

A lot of parents worry about when to wean their premature baby. It can also be confusing to read guidelines for term and well babies.

There are some important differences to consider when weaning a premature baby. However many of the recommendations for term babies are also true for those born early. Parents are still looking for the same signs that their baby might be ready, but these signs may come at different stages for premature babies.

Here, Bliss provides information to help you make a decision about how you would like to handle this process. Every parent and baby will feel and react differently to this change in feeding. You know your baby best, and you are best-placed to recognise the signs that your baby is ready to start weaning. This information can help you identify what these signs are, and how you want to start weaning your baby.

All ages given in this information are from the date your baby would have been born, if they hadn't been born early. This is known as your baby's 'corrected' age, because it 'corrects' for when they were due to be born.

## Before you read on...

There are different ways to approach weaning any baby. For those born prematurely, there is not as much scientific research into the differences between weaning a healthy baby born at term (37-40 weeks' gestation) and those born early.

Because of this, we have provided details of the range of options available. We have used the evidence available, as well as working with health professionals to produce this information. Quotes from health professionals and parents are also included to provide some practical tips which might be useful.

**Bliss does not recommend any particular way of weaning your baby.** This information should not be used by itself, but also with advice from your health professional, where appropriate.

[Why is weaning important?](#)

[When should I wean my premature baby?](#)

[How do I start weaning?](#)

[What foods can my baby have?](#)

[How lumpy should food be?](#)

[What about food allergies?](#)

[What if my baby refuses food?](#)

[Which drinks can I give my baby?](#)

[Things to remember](#)

[References](#)

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## Why is weaning important?

All babies reach a stage where breast or formula milk does not supply all the nutrients they need. Premature babies in particular need careful planning of the nutrients in their food, to make sure they continue to develop and grow.

New tastes and textures help encourage babies to eat a range of foods, which helps make sure that their diet is balanced later in life. Solid foods help babies to practise lip, tongue and jaw movements.

Eating together is also an important social activity. It is thought that babies can learn skills like eating from watching others.

Weaning also provides a great opportunity for all members of your family to become involved in feeding your baby.

**“Sit them with you at meal times from early on so they can watch you all eat and become interested in eating themselves. It’s hard to wean a baby who has no experience of or interest in food.”**

**Rachel, mum to Hugo**



# When should I wean my premature baby?

Guidelines on weaning designed for healthy term babies can be confusing for parents of babies born prematurely. Parents can be unsure when their baby will be ready, and often tell us that they are worried about how to recognise when is a good time to start. This will also be different for every baby.

**“Trust your instinct. You’ll know when your baby is ready to be weaned. Follow their lead.”**

**Claire, mum to Rose and Lily**

Research is divided as to when exactly is best to wean a premature baby. Many of the studies into weaning premature babies agree that it is very hard to choose a single age at which all premature babies should be weaned, because their situations will all be very different.

## Is my baby ready?

The most important thing to look out for before weaning is signs that your baby is ready. Every baby is an individual and will be ready at different stages, especially if they were born early. On the next page there are some important signs to look out for.

## What I get asked most as a...

Paediatric Dietitian

From Caroline King

### ***What signs can I look for to see if my baby is ready to wean?***

“A key way that your baby can show you they are ready is through their facial expressions and body language. Are they holding out their arms, reaching for other people’s food or watching others eat? This can really help to show when they might be interested in their next foods. It can also be helpful to look at how well your baby is feeding and sleeping and if they are settled into a pattern.

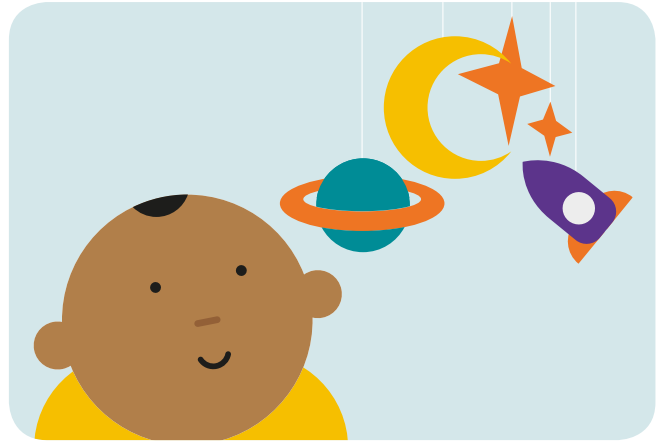
It’s important to note that needing more milk may not mean your baby is ready to wean – this may just mean they are going through a growth spurt.”

## See if your baby can...

[Watch our video](#)



**Support themselves in a seated position. Premature babies might need extra support.**



**Hold their head in a stable position.**



**Show an interest in other people eating.**



**Lean forward and open their mouth towards a spoon or food.**



**Put things to their mouth and make munching, up and down movements.**



**Your baby might show one of these signs first, but it is recommended to wait until you see a few before starting weaning.**

Your baby needing more milk, or needing more feeds in the night is not necessarily a sign that they are ready to wean. This could be a growth spurt.

You do not need to wait for your baby to have teeth or reach a certain weight before weaning.

Some health professionals say that **four months corrected age** is the **youngest age** a premature baby should be weaned. This is because they might not be ready for anything other than milk before this time. It is also because premature babies do not often show these signs of being ready before this time. There are different opinions about the best age range to wean a premature baby. Some health professionals say that premature babies often show these signs that they are ready for more solid foods somewhere between five to six months corrected age.

**Remember** – your baby will show you when they are ready. Because all babies develop differently, your baby might show these signs at different stages to others, especially if they were born early. Try not to focus too much on how old they are, but instead look at the signs your baby is showing. Always talk to a health professional if you are unsure when to begin weaning.



## What I get asked most as a... Paediatric Dietitian

From Annie Aloysius

*When can I start weaning my baby?  
I feel like I'm getting lots of different  
advice about when to start.*

"The short answer is there is no magic date or age. There are a number of things to look for that will help you decide when your baby may be ready. Watch your baby for readiness cues as they mature and develop.

As with any new skill you will notice babies have different styles and ways of learning. Some are happy to open their mouth and have a spoonful of food put in, others like to be in control, touching and feeling food first before they put it in their mouth, and some like a mixture of both. Learning to eat is about exploring, experimenting and becoming more independent.

You know your baby's personality best. So start slowly, respond to their cues and give them the opportunity to show you what they are ready to do."

## What I get asked most as a... Consultant Paediatrician

From Keith Foote

### *How can I maintain breastfeeding until I wean my baby?*

"Babies feed more as they get older. Whether you are breastfeeding or giving your baby formula, it is really important that milk feeds continue during and after the introduction of more solid foods. This is to make sure that your baby continues to get enough nutrients and energy.

If you are finding regular breastfeeding hard, especially as your baby feeds more, you can talk to your health visitor or another health professional. They will be able to give you specific advice about how you can continue to breastfeed, for as long as it feels right and possible for you and your baby. You can also find support from [NHS Start4Life](#)."





## Too early, or too late?

Research appears to suggest that introducing lots of different foods to your baby before just over four months (17 weeks corrected age) can mean an increased risk of them developing eczema, a skin condition causing it to become itchy, red, dry and cracked. If you are concerned about weaning your baby and the risks of eczema, you should talk to your GP, health visitor or consultant.

If you wait until after six months corrected age, some health professionals believe you may miss a good time for your baby to begin developing key skills. Some health professionals suggest that babies are more willing to try new flavours and textures between five and six months. After this time, they might be less willing to try. In fact, some research suggests that premature babies might be more willing to try new foods than term babies.

Some health professionals believe that waiting too long to wean your baby may have negative effects on their development and growth. This could be because the baby needs more nutrients, or because they need to learn skills involved in eating, like hand and mouth coordination, or using their mouth and tongue in different patterns to use cups and spoons.

As we have mentioned, there is not very much research on weaning premature babies. It is important to remember that you know your baby best. Trust your instincts and work with your health professional to find the right time to wean for you and your baby.



# How do I start weaning?

## Preparing

It can help to plan when you want to start weaning. Parents can find it easier if they choose a time when their baby isn't too hungry or tired.

Playing with food is an important part of learning about how to eat it. Giving your baby some food to touch and feel can be helpful. They will likely spit food out to start with, as they get used to new textures. This is to be expected and you can help encourage your baby to continue to eat. This can mean the early stages of weaning can be a bit messy, but this is a usual part of the process of learning!

It can be easier to start with one meal a day and see how your baby reacts. Choose the best time of day for you and your baby. You may want to try feeding your baby with your family at meal times, or separately to start with, or a bit of both.

## Positioning

Like milk feeding, it is important that you and your baby are comfortable when trying new foods.

The best feeding positions will let your baby:

- **Bring their hands together**
- **Be supported to sit upright**
- **Hold their head up easily**

To begin with, you may wish to have your baby in your arms whilst trying food for the first time. This can be helpful to start with, but over time most professionals agree it is better to have them in a seated position in front of you. This means your baby can keep eye contact with you and that you can show how foods can be eaten.

**"Find the right seat. I found a seat that was upright enough to allow easy swallowing but reclined enough to support my baby, as he wasn't ready to sit without support in a high chair."**

**Katherine, mum to Alexander**

Always make sure your baby is supported so that they can sit without sliding or slumping to one side. You should never leave your baby alone whilst they are eating.

Once your baby is older, highchairs with trays can provide a helpful position for your baby to hold food in their hands and feed themselves.

Remember that weaning is a process of introducing your baby to food gradually. Health professionals suggest you should continue with milk feeds until they are around two years old if possible.



# What food can my baby have?

**Make sure you talk to your health professional about any additional nutritional needs your baby may have, especially if they were born very early.**

## To start

If possible, it is best to try and use as much home-prepared food as possible. This makes it easier to make sure the food has all the nutrients your baby needs.

If you do use any shop-bought baby foods, make sure to check the ingredients. Baby food should contain protein, and not have any added salt or sugars. Shop-bought foods are usually sold in different age ranges. This can be confusing if your baby was born early, as you might not know which to use. This might involve trying a few different options, and asking a health professional for advice based on your baby's needs.

You do not necessarily have to prepare a whole meal for your baby. It might be easier to choose one food to try first and see how it goes. It can also be helpful to try a different type of food every couple of days. Some health professionals say it is best to try savoury foods first, and move onto sweeter flavours once they are eating meals. This is because savoury food is generally more nutritious.

**"Our top tip is to make and freeze purees in ice cube trays so you have small portions of a variety of flavours ready on hand for whenever they might seem interested."**

**Michelle, mum to Chloe**

Traditionally, the first foods that are used to wean are smooth, runny foods. This is because your baby will also be learning how to chew, having only taken milk by sucking until now. Many health professionals still suggest this as a first method, and others suggest that a baby's first foods can be more solid. See our section called '[How lumpy should food be?](#)' for more details.

It's important to make sure the foods you choose to begin with are nutritionally balanced, but also contain enough energy for your baby. For example, many vegetables will have a high vitamin content but not as much energy as starchy vegetables like potato. [NHS Choices](#) provide a list of foods you can try at different stages.

## Introducing more foods

After the first few weeks, you can introduce a wider range of foods and, if you have started with soft pureed food, you can introduce more soft lumps. If you have been feeding your baby with a spoon, you can start to encourage them to feed themselves using their hands. This is sometimes called finger feeding.

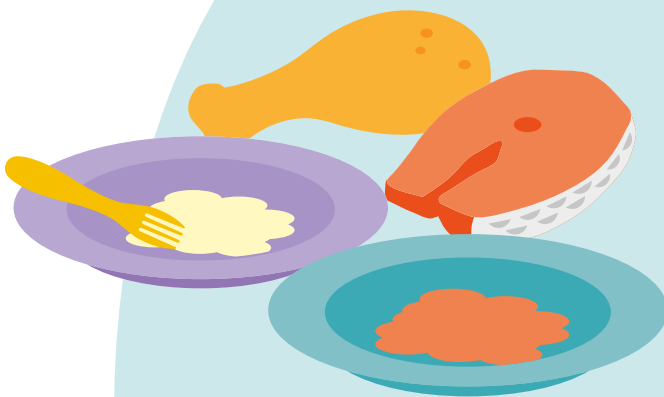
## Vitamins and iron

It is particularly important for premature babies to have enough nutrients in their diet as they grow. It is important that key food groups such as protein and nutrients like iron are maintained at a healthy level. It may be recommended that your child takes supplements such as vitamins C, B12 and D, and/or protein, iron, zinc and/or calcium supplements. Continuing with milk feeding whilst starting weaning will help to maintain some of these nutrients in your baby's diet.

## Some ideas for foods you might like to try are:

Remember, babies don't necessarily need bland food. It is good to introduce them to different flavours and textures. It's important that meals contain a variety of foods to make sure your baby is getting different nutrients.

**Cooked, broken down, boneless meat and fish**



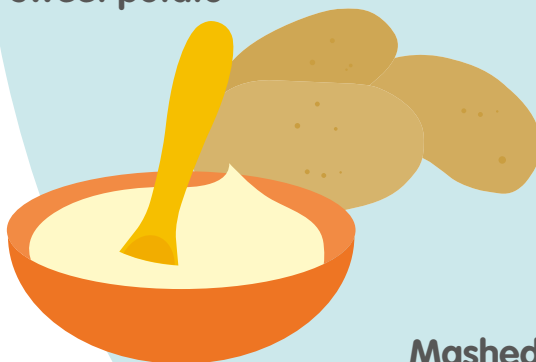
**Pure baby rice, either on its own or with stewed fruit**



**Stewed soft fruit such as apple, pear or peach**



**Softened or mashed vegetables such as potato, sweet potato or yam**



**Mashed banana or avocado**



## Some ideas of ingredients you can begin to introduce are:



## Vegetarian and vegan diets

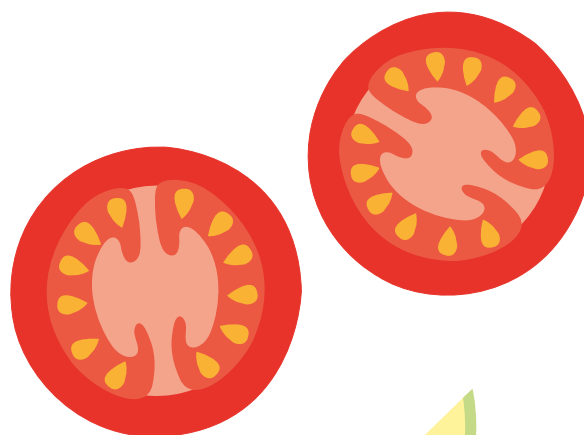
If you would like to give your baby a vegetarian or vegan diet, you should speak directly with your health professional. This is so they can help you make sure that their diet will still be balanced in key areas such as protein, iron, calcium, vitamins and minerals. It's particularly important to make sure your baby gets enough vitamins B12, D and iron if you give them a vegan diet.

**"Don't be scared to try new flavours!  
My little one loves trying something new!"**

**Alison, mum to Noah**

## Avoid low fat options

Low fat options of foods such as butter, yogurt, cheese and oils are generally not recommended for babies and small children. This is because they contain less energy, and often much more sugar.



# How lumpy should food be?

## Baby-led weaning

There are different choices you can make about how you introduce food to your baby, and how solid foods are to begin with. Beginning with pureed food on a baby spoon is how many parents start.

Some healthcare professionals feel it isn't always necessary for first foods to be completely smooth and fed on a spoon. Another popular option is to allow your baby to take and eat food when they are ready. This is known as baby-led weaning.

Baby-led weaning allows the baby to join in family mealtimes and share the same foods, adapted to suit their abilities. They are able to explore food and decide how much or how little to eat, and how quickly. Milk feeds should continue as their main source of nourishment as your baby gets used to a mixed diet and learns to manage different textures.

A baby born early may require some additional nutrition before they are ready to feed themselves. This is because they may take longer to be able to sit up and bring food to their own mouth. It can be helpful to spoon feed until this point. The aim of baby-led weaning, though, is for your baby to feed themselves whenever possible.

**"I found that baby-led weaning let him play with food, and see that food is fun and not something to be feared."**

**Rebecca, mum to Jack**

Many parents find baby-led weaning can contribute to good overall nutrition, enjoyable mealtimes and a healthy relationship with food throughout childhood.

It is very important that your baby is ready to feed themselves by being able to sit by themselves, or with some support. You should always watch your baby when they are starting to eat more lumpy or solid food. This is to make sure they are safe when swallowing food.

## What I get asked most as a... Writer and lecturer in baby-led weaning and parenting

From Gill Rapley

### *Is baby-led weaning suitable for premature babies?*

"Yes. Baby-led weaning is all about each individual baby's development. It's about maximising what they can do, not focusing on what they can't. As soon as your baby is able to hold themselves upright (with little support) and is starting to reach out and grab objects that interest them, they can be offered food to pick up, look at, and – if they are ready – to lick, chew, and maybe even eat.

This is something you can encourage your baby to do even if their medical needs mean that they also have to be given nourishment another way, such as softer foods on a spoon. Sharing family mealtimes, exploring food and feeding themselves can support your baby's overall development as well as helping them to learn about food and enjoy eating."

## Managing lumps

It is important that you do introduce lumps to your baby's food. Babies might find them hard to manage to start, but they will get used to new textures with time. You might find that it can also get harder for your baby to get used to lumps if you wait too long to introduce them.

If weaning has begun with spoon-feeding, you might find it easiest to introduce more lumps when your baby is able to sit and pick up food by themselves.

It can be hard for a baby to take lumps off a spoon. You could try putting lumpier but still soft foods (e.g. ripe mashed banana) on a plate in front of your baby to try to pick up and eat.

Your baby is likely to gag or cough when they first try lumpier food. Try not to worry, as this is usual for babies as they learn. Make sure you stay with them at all times when eating, and encourage your baby. Try to avoid any food with small hard lumps (e.g. fruit pips), or a mixture of liquid and lumps (e.g. cereals with milk) as they may find it hard to control both in their mouth.

"My baby found it difficult moving from puree to lumpy foods, so we did thicker mash for a while and introduced lumps small bits at a time. Mashed potatoes, butternut squash, broccoli and cheese was a firm favourite! She now eats anything and everything!"

**Chelsea, mum to Amber**

Playing with food is an important part of learning. This stage of weaning can be messy, but it is a part of the learning process for your baby.

Some research suggests that babies born before 30 weeks, those who have had help breathing whilst in the intensive care unit, or those who have had surgery might be more likely to have problems with feeding, and may struggle with lumps. If you are worried, always talk to a health professional.



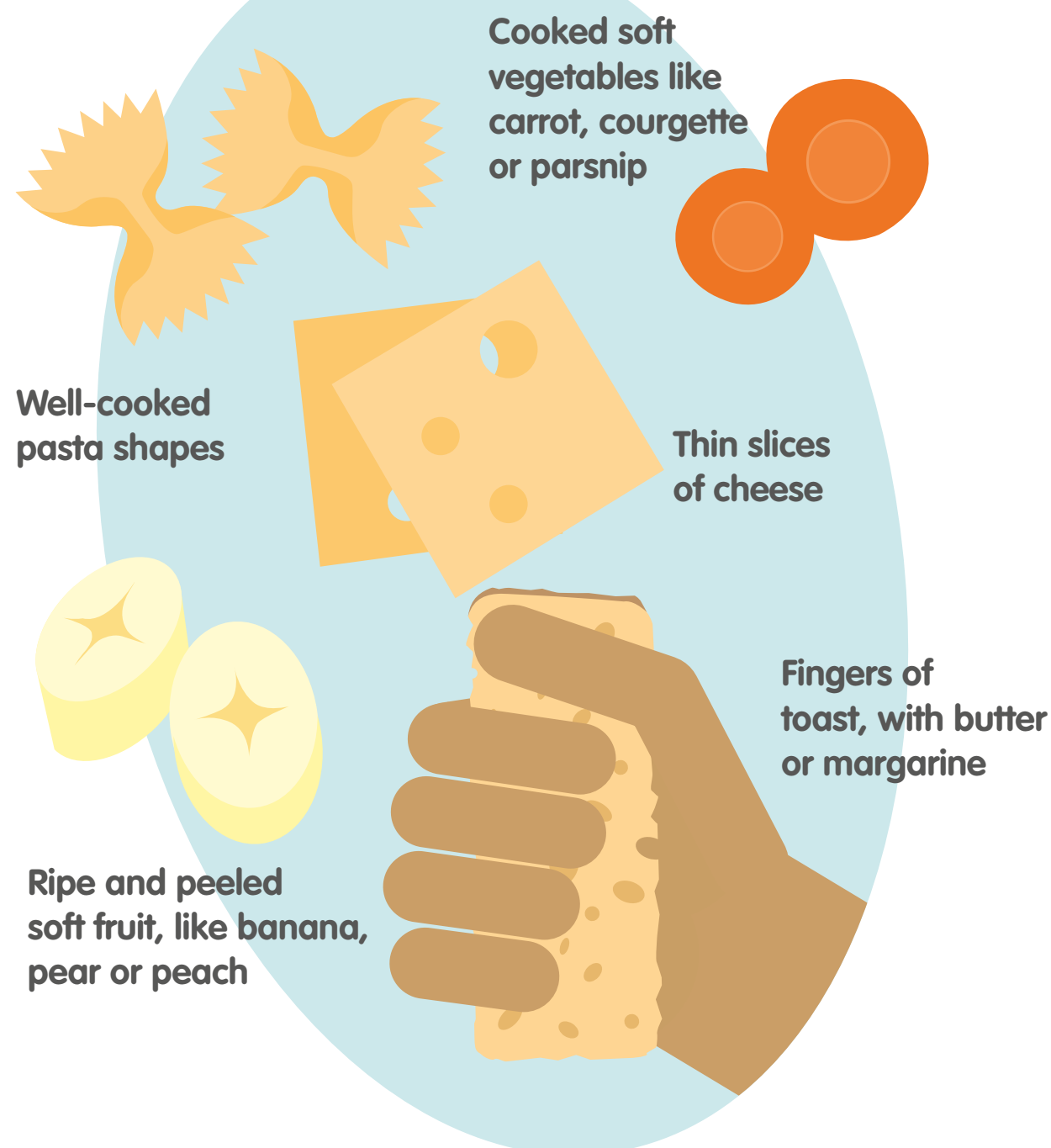


## Finger foods

These foods can be picked up by your baby to allow them to feed themselves. Whenever you choose to introduce these it is another important stage in your baby taking more control over their eating.

More solid foods help to develop chewing skills as well as their hand-eye coordination.

## Some ideas for finger foods are:



## Gagging or choking

It is usual for babies to gag slightly as they get used to more lumpy foods. It is the body's way of getting food back into the mouth to avoid choking. Encourage your baby to keep trying to chew the food. Eventually they will learn to chew and bite food rather than just suck.

Parents sometimes worry about their baby choking. Never leave your baby alone when eating. If your baby ever struggles to breathe, call 999 immediately. You can find information on what to do if your baby chokes from [St John Ambulance](#).

# What about food allergies?

Parents of premature babies often tell us that they are especially worried about their baby developing food allergies.

There is no evidence that premature babies are more likely to develop allergies to food than any other baby.

- If you have a family history of allergies to food (for example nuts, milk, eggs etc.), health professionals generally now advise that parents **should not exclude these foods** from their baby's diet when weaning. In fact, some research suggests that introducing peanuts in an easy to eat way (for example, smooth peanut butter) early on in the weaning process can reduce the risk of developing the allergy.
- However, **if your baby has had eczema and they also have a parent with a history of allergies** (food allergies, asthma, hay fever or eczema) parents should **always check** with their health professional before introducing food with peanuts, such as peanut butter.

"I found starting on puree at six months and putting some finger food on the tray at the same time useful for hand and eye coordination."

Gemma, mum to Lilliana



# What if my baby refuses food?

Your baby will show you when they have had enough or want some more food. These signs will become easier to read with time.

Instead of trying another mouthful if your baby refuses food, try to increase amounts gradually as you learn how your baby shows when they are hungry and full.

All babies will refuse food at some stage. This can be because:

- Food is too hot or cold
- Your baby is feeling unwell
- Your baby is tired
- Your baby is full
- The food is sharp or bitter tasting
- They haven't yet developed chewing, meaning they spit food out as they still use their sucking instinct

Some research also shows that older babies are more likely to refuse new food.

**“Have fun and get messy! Don't worry about how much food they actually consume to start with, let them explore the food with their hands and mouth and have a lovely time. Then they'll know meal times as a happy time.”**

**Eva, mum to Rudi**

You can start with small amounts of food to begin with, especially if you are trying a new food.

If they don't like the food at first, it can be useful to try the food again regularly across a number of meal times. Don't force the food on any one occasion, but keep offering it to them over a period of time to see if they will take it.

Even though you might be worried about waiting too long to wean your baby, it is important not to force your baby to eat.

Some research suggests that babies who show signs that they are ready to wean are more comfortable, less stressed and show more appetite when eating than those who are given food before they are ready.

Many health professionals recommend encouraging babies when they are trying new foods. Sometimes, babies might be more willing to try food from someone else's plate, making family meal times the perfect time for this to happen. Babies can pick up on others' moods, so if you are finding it difficult to encourage your baby to eat, try keeping meal times short to begin with. This will help your baby if they are becoming bored or restless.



# Which drinks can I give my baby?

## Continuing milk feeds

Starting weaning does not mean stopping milk feeds. It is important to continue to feed your baby breastmilk or formula until they are only eating solid foods, in particular until introducing cow's milk to their diet (if you choose to do so). Guidelines from the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) recommend that it is beneficial to breastfeed until your baby is two years old, if you can. The [UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative](#) helps health professionals to help you continue to breastfeed if you have chosen to do so. Ask for help from a health professional, if you need it.

Whether you have breastfed your baby or given them formula until weaning, they will need vitamin A, C and D supplements when they move onto cow's milk, which for premature babies is suggested to be around 12 months. It is recommended for children to keep taking these vitamins until they start school.

**"It took six months before my baby (born at 27 weeks) intentionally swallowed anything. Even then, she was extremely fussy and everything had to be hard and crunchy. What helped me was remembering how far she had come: each extra 1ml of milk was an achievement when she was tiny, so each extra mini-mouthful should be celebrated too!"**

**Ellen, mum to Daisy**

## Other drinks

Before your baby is six months corrected age, you can offer your baby cooled boiled water in a beaker or cup at meal times. After six months corrected age, you do not need to boil the water. Giving your baby water is important during hot weather to maintain fluid levels and avoid them becoming constipated.

If you give your baby juice, make sure it is very diluted (more than the manufacturers' guidelines, which are suggested for adults).

Make sure that your baby doesn't fill up on drink. This might make them less likely to eat.

You can offer cow's milk to your premature baby from around 12 months. They will also need vitamin A, C and D supplements until the age of five. You can buy these from your local pharmacy.



## Using cups

It's important for your baby to learn the skills for drinking from a free-flowing cup. You can start to offer a beaker or cup for drinks at around six to eight months corrected age. Formula can continue to be given in a bottle.

Non-spill beakers can make babies continue to use the sucking instinct for longer than ideal. In order to help develop the skills needed for drinking, try to use free-flowing beakers and cups.

## Your baby's teeth

Too much sugar and acid in the diet can cause tooth decay. Try to limit the amount of sugar your baby eats. This includes limiting the amount of fruit juice your baby drinks. Water will hydrate them well. Always make sure any juice is diluted.

Even if your baby does not have teeth yet, you can still clean their mouth with a baby brush and a very small amount of toothpaste. This is good to do once you have introduced food which contains sugar.

You can ask a health professional about brushing teeth and if fluoride supplements might be needed.

# Things to remember

There are many choices to make about weaning your baby, and during this time there are some important things to remember:

## Things you can do:



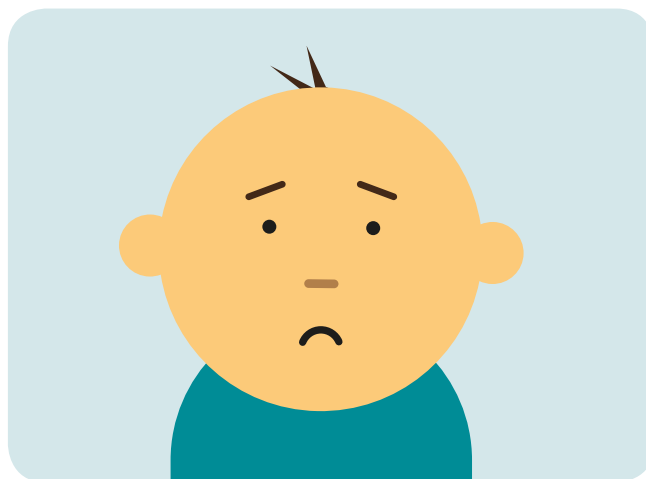
Give your baby a variety of flavours, textures and tastes as soon as you can. This helps your baby get used to different types of food and can help you make sure their diet is balanced.



Try to use as many home cooked meals as possible. This is the easiest way of keeping track of the nutrients in the food. It also helps to include the baby's mealtimes in the family routine.



Talk to your health professional if you would like to give your baby a vegetarian or vegan diet. It's important their diet remains balanced and includes all the nutrients they need to grow and develop. See our section called ['What food can my baby have?'](#) for more information.



Talk to your health professional if your baby becomes constipated. It can be a common problem.

## Things to avoid:



Force feeding your baby. See our section called [‘What if my baby refuses food’](#) for more information if your baby is struggling to eat.



Adding solids to your baby's bottle. It takes time for babies to learn how to control both liquids and solids in their mouths safely.



Adding salt to food or the water food is cooked in. There is enough salt naturally present in food for babies.



Adding honey to food before one year of age. There is a small risk of a stomach infection.



Adding sugar to food. There is enough sugar naturally present in food for babies.



Giving your baby whole nuts, grapes or anything else they could choke on.

# References

Here you can find full details of the references used to create this information. They are listed in the order in which the information appears. If you ever have any questions about the information provided by Bliss, email us at [hello@bliss.org.uk](mailto:hello@bliss.org.uk)

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## Review information

### Weaning your premature baby

9th edition

Previously 'Weaning your premature baby' print booklet

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### Written, edited and researched by:

Rachel Jarmy, Senior Content and Information Officer  
Gemma Ellis, Senior Communications Officer  
Mehali Patel, Research Engagement Officer

**Designed by:** Chris Beardsall

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### Healthcare professional members:

**Caroline King**, Neonatal Dietitian, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

**Annie Aloysius**, Clinical Specialist Speech and Language Therapist (Neonatology), Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

**Keith Foote**, Consultant Paediatrician, Royal Hampshire County Hospital, Winchester

**Gill Grevile-Harris**, Honorary Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham

**Gill Rapley**, Writer and Lecturer in Baby-Led Weaning and Parenting

**Zoe Gordon**, Speech and Language Therapist, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford

**Elaine McInnes**, Nurse, Midwife and Health Visitor, The Institute of Health Visiting, London

### Public members:

Neal Smith  
Ian Morley  
Stephanie Chadwick  
Vicki Flippance  
Paula Oliveira  
Philip Lund  
Victoria Franklin  
Anna Verghese  
Hanna Wilcock  
Kelvin Dawson  
Rachael Doyle

# Helpline 0808 801 0322



 020 7378 1122

 [ask@bliss.org.uk](mailto:ask@bliss.org.uk)

 [bliss.org.uk](http://bliss.org.uk)

 Bliss, 2nd floor Chapter House  
18-20 Crucifix Lane  
London SE1 3JW

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