

Weaning your premature baby

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



Bliss
for babies born
premature or sick

About us

Bliss is the UK's leading charity for babies born premature or sick. We were founded over 40 years ago by parents determined to give all babies on the neonatal unit the very best care. Today we're just as committed to giving each and every baby the best chance of survival and quality of life.

How Bliss can help

We offer free information:

- Online at bliss.org.uk
- In print from your unit or via our online shop – shop.bliss.org.uk

We offer emotional and practical support through:

- Our email service: hello@bliss.org.uk

- Bliss Champions: volunteers offering support. Look for a poster or ask a member of staff if a Bliss Champion is available on your unit. Or use our video call service by visiting bliss.org.uk/support-via-video-call-form to arrange

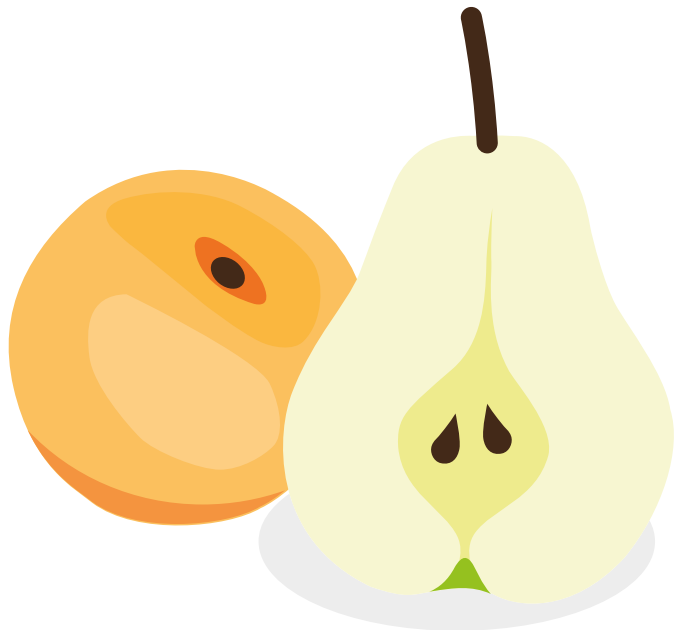
- Our private peer-support group on Facebook. Search 'Bliss community support group' to find us.

"After a very early arrival at 26+3 weeks, and 11 weeks in the unit, we found weaning to be a positive experience. Every meal time feels like a further nutrition boost for our superhero!"

- Rachel, mum to Charlie

What does our weaning guide cover?

1. About our weaning guide
2. Getting started with weaning
3. What foods can my baby have while weaning?
4. Introducing textured foods
5. What drinks can my baby have while weaning?
6. Moving forward with more foods for weaning
7. Things to remember when weaning your baby



1. About our weaning guide

This information is about introducing your premature baby to more solid foods, and the steps you can follow as your baby moves from only feeding on milk, to a mixed diet of solid foods and milk. 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.

This information has been written by a group of parents and specialist healthcare professionals who work on neonatal units and in the community.

Before you read on...

The information in this booklet differs in some ways from our previous advice. We now advise you respond to your baby's cues that they are ready to begin weaning, rather than just considering their age. Also, we are using **"corrected age"** rather than **"uncorrected age"** to advise the earliest and latest ages to consider weaning. There is evidence that this approach will ensure your baby is developmentally ready to start, which will make the process easier.

If your baby was very ill while in the neonatal unit, or has additional long term medical or developmental needs, you may need more specific support with weaning than is available in this guide. If you don't already have a follow-up appointment with your local neonatal team, ask your community healthcare team about a referral for more individual advice.

'Corrected age' and 'uncorrected age'

Your baby's uncorrected age is the number of weeks or months since their birth. Your baby's corrected age is the number of weeks or months since their original due date. So, they can only have a corrected age once they have passed their due date!

E.g. For a baby born at 30 weeks gestation age (10 weeks early), who is now 12 weeks old:

- Uncorrected age is 12 weeks
- Corrected age is 2 weeks



How can weaning be different with a premature baby?

Parents with a baby born early can find it difficult to know when they should start weaning. This information will help you decide when is a good time.

Babies who were born preterm may develop more slowly than babies who were born at full term. They will usually sit at a later age, so this guide suggests when your baby might be ready to start weaning, taking this into consideration.

You may feel unsure about how your baby will manage weaning after such an unplanned or unexpected start to life. This guide aims to walk you through the process and make it as enjoyable as possible.

Many of the recommendations about weaning babies born preterm are the same as for babies born at term. There are national recommendations which are available at www.nhs.uk/start4life/weaning



There are also some good meal ideas and information available from the First Steps Nutrition Trust: [Eating well: the first year](#)



Throughout this booklet we will signpost you to helpful links from both websites.

My baby was born at term but sick – can this information help me?

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 healthcare professional for advice. 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.

The development of eating and drinking

All babies reach a stage when they are ready to try solid food alongside their milk. Your baby will gradually develop skills in holding and exploring the food they are offered. This includes touching, tasting and smelling it. Over time, you will notice your baby gradually needing less support to sit and they will bring food and other objects to their mouth by themselves. Your baby will push food out less with their tongue and learn to bite and

chew. Given the opportunity they will also learn to drink from a cup, beaker and straw.

Your baby will also learn to eat by watching you eat. Mealtimes are an excellent time for this as they are sociable and enjoyable. Eating together as a family helps you and your baby learn together about weaning. If you have twins, triplets or more, it is natural to compare their progress, however each baby will develop their feeding skills at their own individual pace.

Remember: All babies develop and progress with weaning at their own pace. There can be big differences between preterm and term babies, and also between different preterm babies, even if they are born at the same gestational age. Try not to compare your baby with any others.

2. Getting started with weaning

"You know your baby best, so trust your instinct, go slow and go steady. They have learned so much in such a short space of time. You and them are a team. You have got this!"

- Dolly, mum to a baby boy, born at 31.5 weeks

How do I know if my baby is ready to start weaning?

Every baby will be ready to start weaning at a slightly different time. It is helpful to look at your baby's cues.

Wait until you see three or four of these cues before you try weaning:



- Your baby can sit up by themselves, needing only a little support



- They can hold their head up easily and keep it upright while sitting



- They explore objects with their fingers, hands, and mouth



- They reach and grasp for food and/or open their mouth when food is offered



- They are beginning to bite and chew toys

Mistaken cues

The following behaviours are sometimes mistaken as cues that your baby might be ready to begin weaning. However, there is no evidence to suggest that they are cues, so it is best not to use them:

1. Your baby is drinking more milk – this may be a sign that they are going through a growth spurt and need more milk rather than solids. It's OK to give more milk when your baby asks for it.

2. Waking up more at night – this may also be a sign of a growth spurt (see point above) or moving to a new developmental stage. Studies show that weaning doesn't help babies sleep longer at night.

3. Your baby reaches a certain weight – there is no specific weight that your baby needs to be to start weaning.

4. Your baby has teeth - there is huge variation in the age at which babies' teeth come through but this is not connected to their readiness for solid food.



Important dates

Around five months corrected age is the youngest a premature baby may show cues that they are ready to begin weaning. Before this time, they are unlikely to have developed all the skills they need to eat solid foods.

By around six months corrected age many babies are ready to begin solid foods. Go by your baby's cues and if they are not ready by this time it's OK to leave it another week or two. If your baby is still not showing readiness cues to wean by seven months corrected age, contact your Health Visitor for advice.

Good to know: Young babies often show an interest in other people eating before they are ready to start weaning themselves.

If this happens before five months corrected age it is not a useful cue, but after five months corrected age, it can help to show that your baby is ready to start weaning.

How do we start weaning?

It's helpful to choose a time in the day when your baby is well rested and calm - a good time can be after a nap. If they are tired or unwell, they may not be able to cope with something new like weaning. Also, if they are too hungry, they may get frustrated, so a little while after a milk feed may be another option. Make sure you have plenty of time.

Try to be somewhere without lots of distractions. This will help you and your baby to focus on learning about eating together. Your baby will be learning lots of new things when they are weaning so it helps if they can concentrate. If there are many other things happening in the room this can distract them, so they lose their concentration.

It is helpful if you can keep a calm atmosphere in the room. Put your phone to one side and switch off the television and other screens so you can give your baby your full attention. Exploring food is an important part of learning about how to eat it. Offer your baby some food to

touch, smell and taste during the mealtime.

By 'offering' we mean put on your baby's plate so they can pick it up and explore it. They may do this by:

- looking at it
- feeling it with their hands
- and finally, trying some in their mouth.

The early stages of weaning can be messy, so be prepared by eating somewhere where mess and spills are OK, or putting down a towel or plastic mat that you can clean up easily later.

It is best for you and your baby to wear clothes that you don't mind getting food on. A soft silicone bib with a pocket can be useful as it can catch the food before it goes on the floor.

Good to know: Wait until the end of the meal to clean your baby's face and hands.

It doesn't matter if your baby has a bit of food on them during the meal. In fact, it is important for the development of your baby's senses to feel food on their hands and face during a mealtime. If they are wiped often during a meal, this can be a distraction when they really want to be involved in the food. It could also make them upset if they are hungry and want to eat.

Whether you start weaning by offering spoonfuls of smooth food or encourage your baby to try feeding themselves is a matter of choice. Both methods are discussed below in the section on textures.

Remember: Always stay and watch your baby while they eat to ensure they are safe.

There is no need for complicated equipment or expensive gadgets. It is good to keep in touch with other parents during weaning to share tips on how to prepare food simply with usual kitchen equipment. You can join our peer-support group on Facebook for advice from other parents.

Search 'Bliss community support group' in Facebook to find us.

"I think one of the biggest things to remember is that every prem baby does things in their own time. Some may be ready earlier than others and that's completely normal."

- Fiona, mum to Niamh, born at 28 weeks, Conor born at 29 weeks, and Aoife, born at 33 weeks.

How should my baby be sitting for weaning?

Once you think it is time to start offering your baby solid food, there are several ways to support them with seating. When sitting, it is important for them to have their body straight and head upright. Also, if possible, it is good for your baby to be at the same level as other people so they can watch others eating.

Before your baby can sit on their own, you can put a rolled-up towel around their trunk (middle) to help them stay upright or support them firmly on your lap.



The importance of sitting or being supported to sit when weaning

- It allows your baby to reach their hands out in front of them and bring them together, which is important for picking up objects including food.
- It helps your baby to see what others are doing because watching and copying is an important part of learning.
- Being upright and able to look around at other people helps babies to learn about communicating with others.
- Once your baby can sit in a highchair, you can face them during the meal to watch and help them eat.
- Being upright makes eating safer and reduces the risk of choking.

If you have your baby sitting on your lap, it is best to:

- Make sure their back is supported against your body
- Support their middle so they can keep in an upright position
- Let them explore food on the table/plate in front of them with their hands - they probably won't be eating much food at this stage

Good to know: Term babies can often sit at around five-six months whereas preterm babies usually take a month or two longer. However, if your baby is not able to sit by themselves by seven-eight months corrected age (without a towel or you to support them) ask your Health Visitor or GP for advice.

3. What foods can my baby have while weaning?

“Weaning can be a very enjoyable experience with your baby. Take your time and enjoy watching them discover new foods, textures and learn new skills. Don't be afraid to offer your baby the same foods as what you are having.”

- Alex, dad to Freddie, born at 26 weeks

What sort of foods should I start feeding my baby?

When you start weaning, your baby will only take a small amount of food as they get used to something new. Milk will still be their main food for many months. You only need to offer food once a day to start with. You can follow your baby's cues and gradually build up the number of meals. Remember to take your time and go at your baby's pace.

First foods may be smooth or mashed, or you may choose to offer more textured foods early on. Visit page 20 for more

information about introducing textured foods. You can feed your baby using a small soft plastic spoon, with your hands, or your baby may feed themselves by hand. You can give your baby a spoon to hold as you feed them, either with some food already on it, or empty.

It's not a good idea to put baby cereal into a bottle. It doesn't help your baby put on weight or learn how to eat solid food and it can mean they don't drink enough fluid. If you buy baby food in pouches, empty the food into a bowl and let your baby feed themselves, or use a spoon. This helps your baby learn to eat, rather than just sucking directly from the pouch, and can help reduce the risk of tooth decay.

There are no special types of first weaning foods that are better for preterm babies. However, it is helpful to use as many home-prepared foods as you can. Gradually build up the range of tastes you offer.

The benefits of home-prepared meals

- They can help your baby move on to eating family meals, as the flavours will be more familiar to them
- They are easier to prepare to the texture your baby can manage
- They are usually cheaper and can be more nutritious than shop-bought baby foods
- They are encouraged by the British Dental Association as many commercial baby foods are high in sugar and processed foods, which are bad for babies' teeth.
- You can build up the different tastes of your baby's meals by trying various different combinations of foods
- You have the opportunity to cook a batch of food that can be frozen in small portions (for example in ice cube trays), to use later.

Of course, there are always times when shop bought food

is useful and easier to use, and that is fine. It can also be mixed with homemade food.

Good to know: There are some foods you shouldn't give your baby in the first year of life.
For more information visit the NHS Start 4 Life website:



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

- Baby rice (made up with your baby's usual milk), either on its own or with cooked fruit or vegetables
- Cooked, starchy, mashed vegetables such as potato, sweet potato or yam
- Other vegetables cooked and mashed, such as carrot, broccoli or squash

- Cooked or raw mashed soft fruit, with skin and pips or stones removed, such as apple, pear, peach, banana, or avocado

- Cooked, mashed split lentils without skins

- Scrambled or mashed boiled eggs (using your baby's usual milk to mash) - make sure they have the Red Lion Stamp on them

- Cooked, soft or pureed meat or fish, mixed with baby rice or vegetables

Some other useful tips as you progress with weaning:

- Babies often like strong tastes so it's fine to add garlic, onion, herbs, or spices to your baby's food if you use them in your own cooking

- If you need some liquid to soften mashed food, use your baby's usual milk. If you use stock or gravy, it should be salt free

- Avoid adding salt, sugar, or honey to your baby's food

- If you enjoy food with chilli, introduce it gradually to your baby's food

Other useful guidance on foods and meals

Scan these QR codes for lots of different meal ideas and recipes for each stage of weaning:



Weaning Recipes & Meal Ideas



Eating well: the first year

Follow these links for more information on safe preparation of your baby's food:



**Start for Life |
Preparing Food Safely**



**Start for life |
Storing & Reheating Food**

If you are concerned about your baby's bowel habits during weaning, such as constipation or loose stools, contact your GP or Health Visitor.

Preterm babies can appear to have digestive problems, pulling faces and being quite noisy around mealtimes.

As long as their poo is soft there is not usually any cause for concern, and they will gradually get used to the sensations in their stomach.

If you are concerned your baby might have acid reflux, visit our page about it for more information:



Bliss Reflux Information

"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

What if my baby refuses food while weaning?

Refusing food is very common in young children – it's all part of their learning. If your baby refuses food, instead of offering another mouthful, stop and wait to see if they give you cues that they want to try again. Don't force them to take more food. Your baby will show you signs that they have had enough.

Start with small amounts of food to begin with, especially if you are trying a new food, and don't expect it all to be eaten. If your baby doesn't seem to like a particular food at first, it is likely to be because it is not familiar to them. If you are spoon feeding, offer the spoon gently. Only put it into your baby's mouth if they open their mouth to accept the food.

Babies pick up on how others are feeling, so try not to show any anxiety or frustration at mealtimes as it might put your baby off eating. Gradually increase the amount you offer in response to how much your baby is eating. Once you think they have had enough, take away any leftovers and don't comment on what they haven't eaten.

Even if you think they haven't had enough to eat, don't worry. They will usually eat more when offered food later that day or the day after. None of us eat the same amount of food at every mealtime.

How do I know if my baby has had enough to eat?

Here are some examples of cues that your baby has finished eating:

- Turning their head away
- Pushing the spoon away
- Spitting food out
- Losing concentration
- Becoming restless and easily distracted by other things

Try not to wait until your baby begins to get bored, upset or cry before offering a different food or ending the meal. Most babies will eat what they want in the first 20 minutes or so of a meal. After that they may carry on exploring food and eating a little, but it is fine to stop the meal when they begin to lose interest. Your baby will let you know when they have had enough food and are ready to end a mealtime. Over time, you will learn the cues that your baby gives to tell you they are finished with eating before they get bored or distressed.

Reasons your baby may refuse food

All babies will refuse food at some stage. Your baby may do this because:

- The food is too hot or too cold
- They are tired
- They are already full
- They are not yet used to the food's taste or texture
- They are feeling unwell

Exposure to new foods increases their acceptance

For all babies, weaning is a time to learn about tastes and textures which are very different from the milk they are used to. Sometimes a new food is greeted with a grimace or a gag - even if it isn't lumpy - or pushed out of the baby's mouth. However, it has been shown that offering the same food several times over a few weeks can increase a baby's familiarity with the food and help them learn to enjoy it. We all tend to like and accept foods we are more familiar with, and this is the same for babies.

4. Introducing textured foods

"Above all, don't panic if your baby doesn't take to eating straight away. They will get there in their own time.

Top tip - bananas are great!"

- Joanne, mum to Albert, born at 32 weeks, and Ernest, born at 30 weeks

How should I introduce textured foods?

In the past, it has been common to offer only smooth, runny foods from a spoon at the start of weaning. More recently, "baby-led weaning" has encouraged starting with soft solid foods that a baby can pick up and eat by themselves. You can start trying this once they can sit upright or be helped to do so.

It is good for your baby to have opportunities to feed themselves whenever possible. This could be by letting them feed themselves with a spoon or with their fingers, so they learn how different textured foods feel before they put them in their mouth.

Whichever way your baby is weaned, they will start to take more textured foods at some stage, either from a spoon or by finger feeding. **It is useful to encourage your baby to try mashed foods by, or around, seven months corrected age if you can.** They may take longer to learn to manage lumps if you leave it until they are older. Babies take time to learn to chew and often push lumpy food out of their mouth with their tongue at first. Don't worry, this is normal and gradually your baby will stop doing this.

Good to know: When first learning to manage textured foods, your baby may push food out with their tongue and gag.

See our section below about gagging and choking.

If your baby is taking smooth food from a spoon and they are familiar with the taste, try to make it into a thicker texture. Alongside spoon feeding, give some soft finger food to encourage your baby to explore and bring food to their mouth

using their hands. Ready-made baby foods are usually sold in different age ranges, with different textures. Some baby foods, sold as seven month or 12 month foods, can have quite hard lumps in a runny puree. This combination can be difficult for babies to manage, so these foods are best avoided. A better option is to introduce texture by mashing soft foods with a fork.

The importance of being with your baby during mealtimes:

- It's not safe for babies to be left alone with food. Watch your baby carefully, both when you are feeding them and when they are feeding themselves.

- You can reduce the risk of choking by looking to see how your baby is managing more lumpy foods. You can help to make sure they don't take lumps that are too big for them.

- You can see your baby's reaction to food, and you can join in eating a little of any new foods they may not be sure about. Babies learn by copying others, so if they see you enjoying food, it will help encourage them to try it.

- During feeding and mealtimes your baby will communicate with you about how they are feeling, so watching them helps you to see all these cues.



"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**

Finger foods

These are foods that your baby can pick up and feed to themselves. This is an important stage for your baby to develop more control of their eating. Try finger foods as soon as you can see your baby is able to pick up things and put them in their mouth.

To start with, finger foods should be about the size and shape of an adult finger. They should also be soft, so they can be easily squashed. Giving a choice of finger foods from the family meal helps to include your baby in family mealtimes and lets them share the same types of food.

They can explore food and decide how much or how little to eat, and how quickly. Being offered finger foods helps to develop chewing skills as well as your baby's hand-eye coordination.

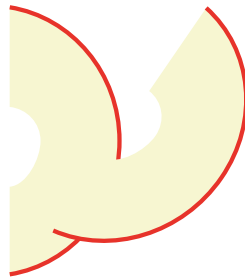
Good to know: Babies need to practise a lot before they can eat independently, and it can take many months. During the early months of weaning there are no set amounts your baby should eat. Take it slowly and go at their pace – and keep giving their usual milk when they ask for it.

Some ideas for finger foods

- Ripe and peeled soft fruit, like banana, pear or peach
- Cooked soft vegetables, like carrot, courgette, parsnip or sweet potato
- Well-cooked shredded meat or flaked fish, with all the bones removed
- Fingers of toast, pitta bread or chapatti, with butter or other similar spread*
- Well-cooked pasta shapes
- Pieces of falafel or garlic bread**
- Cheese, either in thin slices or grated**

*This can help your baby swallow these foods more easily but you don't have to add much. You can give them dry once your baby is more skilled at eating.

**Some of these foods can contain a lot of salt, so don't give them too often. Also, remember to avoid adding salt to any cooking water.



Gagging and choking

Gagging is a reflex which helps to stop food getting into the airway, or big lumps being swallowed before they've been chewed. It's very likely your baby will gag many times while they are learning to eat solid food. Choking is much more serious but it's also very rare.

Gagging

Gagging in babies is triggered when food touches the middle of their tongue. It can look as if your baby is spitting out foods but it isn't because they don't like the food, it's because of an automatic gag response. Gagging happens more often when babies begin to eat lumpier food. At first they may suck the food, meaning that a lump gets to their throat before being chewed. They will then gag to bring it back into their mouth.

As they grow older, they will develop the skills to move food around their mouth and to chew lumpy food to a size they can manage. This skill helps reduce the gag reflex.

It's a good idea not to leave it too late to introduce lumpy foods as it may take longer for your baby to learn how to manage them. Aim to introduce them by around seven months corrected if you can.

The NHS Start 4 Life website has more information about gagging, including a useful video on what gagging looks and sounds like which you can find by scanning this QR code:



When your baby gags on their food, try not to panic. They may react to your panicking and become upset. Gently reassuring them while they work it out for themselves is the best way to help them learn how to manage lumps.

Foods that are a mixture of liquid and lumps (e.g., firm cereals with milk) may be more challenging to start with. They can lead to more gagging, as your baby may find them harder to chew or control in their mouth. If your baby gags a lot on these foods, leave them for a couple of weeks then try them again.

Choking

Choking is different from gagging; it is what happens when an object gets lodged in the airway, blocking the flow of air. It happens rarely but needs swift action.

You can reduce the risk of choking by avoiding hard foods and making sure small round foods (such as peas, sweetcorn, and blueberries) are squashed or mashed.

Make sure you always stay with your baby and keep watching them while they are eating.

5. What drinks can my baby have while weaning?

Milk feeds

During the early stages of weaning, your baby will carry on taking the same amount of breastmilk or formula milk. This will be an important part of your baby's diet until they are one year corrected, but they will gradually reduce the amount of milk they ask for as they take more solid food.

If you and your baby decide to stop breastfeeding, you can give them:

- infant formula, if your baby is under one year corrected age, or
- full fat cows' milk if they are over one year corrected age

Good to know: It is important not to give cows' milk as your baby's main drink before they are one year corrected age. This is because cows' milk is similar in calories to breastmilk or formula milk but very low in iron. This means it can fill babies up but not provide them with enough iron, which can lead to iron deficiency.

Other drinks

Babies who are fully breastfed don't usually need any extra drinks before six months corrected age, at the earliest.

Soon after you start weaning, you can offer your baby tap water which should be boiled and allowed to cool (test the temperature before you offer it). After six months corrected age, you do not need to boil the water.

First Steps Nutrition have a useful flyer about water guidance for babies which you can see by scanning this QR code:



It is best to give your baby only milk or water. Avoid giving other drinks such as tea, coffee, juices, sweetened or fizzy drinks.

Sugary drinks are not nutritious and can reduce your baby's appetite for more nutritious food. It can also be bad for their teeth.

Using a cup

It's important for your baby to learn how to drink from a cup or beaker. You can start to offer one at mealtimes, at around six months corrected age.

Babies will continue to breastfeed or have milk in a bottle during weaning, but a cup can be introduced alongside breast or bottle feeding.

For your baby to learn to drink from a cup, it is best to offer them an open cup or a "free flowing" lidded beaker. These are ones where the drink pours out freely if you turn them upside down.

Cups and beakers which have valves to stop any spills require your baby to suck in much the same way as when bottle feeding. This means that they don't help your baby to develop the skills needed for drinking from a cup.

6. Moving forward with more weaning foods

"It's okay if your baby does things at their own pace, they've overcome a lot and they will get there in time. Don't put too much pressure on yourself and enjoy the new experience together."

- Katie, mum to Danny, born at 24 weeks

What sort of foods should my baby be having?

As your baby begins to increase the amount of solid food they eat, it is important to give them a wide variety of nutritious food. This is because, after a few months, they will begin to reduce the amount of milk they drink.

Scan the QR codes below for some useful meal ideas and recipes for your baby:



What To Feed Your Baby



Eating well: the first year

Although this refers to seven to nine months, your baby could try these foods earlier if weaning started around six months corrected age.

Gradually, your baby will move towards having three meals a day: breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Up to around 12 months corrected age, babies don't need snacks between meals. If you think your baby is hungry in between meals, offer extra milk feeds instead.

Here are some things you can include at main meals so your baby has a variety of food types

- A protein food, such as meat or fish, lentils/beans or egg - these foods also contain iron, which is very important to avoid iron deficiency and anaemia
- A starchy vegetable, such as potato, yam, or rice
- A vegetable, such as carrot or broccoli

When your baby is eating three meals per day you can then offer two courses, for example, a savoury meal before a pudding like fruit or yogurt.

There is no set time when this will happen. Follow your baby's cues, which will show you when they are ready to increase the number of meals and courses.

Good to know: You can buy plastic bowls with a suction base. These are less likely to end up on the floor and also give your baby a good surface to move food around and explore it.



Allergies

Preterm babies are no more likely to develop food allergies than full term babies. The best advice on how to avoid allergies is the same as for those born at full term. This can be found on the NHS website or by scanning the QR code below:



Food allergies in babies and young children

However, if you are concerned that your baby may have a food allergy, ask your GP for a referral to an allergy specialist and a dietitian.

It is best not to remove foods from your baby's diet without guidance because your baby may miss out on important nutrients.

Avoid low fat options

Low fat options of foods, such as low fat yogurt, are not recommended for babies and small children. This is because they provide less energy, which is needed for growth. They can also contain more sugar.

Other foods to avoid

The NHS website has a useful list of foods you should not give your baby for weaning. You can find it by scanning this QR code:



Foods to avoid giving babies and young children

What about vegetarian or vegan diets?

If you choose to give your baby a vegetarian diet please speak to your Health Visitor, as they may need additional supplements. It is not recommended that

young babies are given a vegan diet, but if you have questions about this you should talk to your Health Visitor.

First Steps Nutrition have some useful information about early nutrition and links to other sources on their website - Eating well, early years — First Steps Nutrition Trust.



Family mealtimes

Family mealtimes are a really good opportunity for your baby to learn about food and eating.

At first they may just watch the family eat, but gradually you can start to offer them small tastes and finger foods to try.

Sometimes, babies are more willing to try new foods from someone else's plate and family mealtimes can be the perfect time for this to happen.

As your baby tries new things you will discover what their favourite foods are, and they will enjoy learning to feed themselves - and maybe feeding you too!

How babies learn about food

Babies learn by copying their parents and others around them. There are lots of things about mealtimes and food that your baby can learn by eating with you. Your baby will watch you while you eat, and this is a good chance to show them how much you are enjoying your food. Your baby will learn about chewing skills by watching others eat, so make sure they can see you and others during a meal. Try describing the texture, colour, and smell of the foods you're eating. They will also learn by watching you use cutlery to cut up food, move it around your plate and take it to your mouth to eat. Be positive about foods, even if you do not like them yourself. This will help your baby to try more foods and increase their acceptance of many different foods.

Vitamins and iron

It is recommended that all children, from birth to four years old, are given a supplement of vitamins A, C and D. These are available from pharmacies and via the Healthy Start scheme.

You may be entitled to free Healthy Start vitamins.

Visit the NHS Healthy Start website by scanning this QR code:



Getting vitamins

It is important that you carry on with the full course of any iron or vitamin supplements which your baby has been prescribed, either by the neonatal team or your GP. This will help replenish and maintain your baby's stores.

By the time your baby is around one year corrected age, their diet should give them all the iron that they need. But some babies need supplements for longer. If you are advised to, carry on giving an iron supplement.

If you are not sure about vitamins and iron for your baby, ask your Health Visitor or GP.

Remember: Check the 'use by' dates on any bottles of iron and vitamins. Some iron supplements have a short shelf life once opened.

Vitamin D

All vitamins are important, and most can be provided once your baby is eating a varied diet that includes a range of different foods.

However, it is not possible to get enough vitamin D from food because it is not present in large enough amounts.

Vitamin D can be made in our bodies as a result of exposure to sunlight.

In the UK, this works from around April to the end of September, but it is not a reliable way to get enough all year round.

This means your baby will need a supplement of vitamin D once they have finished the vitamin course recommended by your neonatal unit.

Ideally, everyone in the family will take vitamin D, especially during the winter. This applies especially to new mothers, to help them recover their own vitamin stores and prepare for any future pregnancies.

This is because newborn babies who are breastfed depend on their mother's vitamin D stores for the first few months.

Look for a supplement which gives 400units (10ug) per day. This dose is suitable for adults, children and babies.



Growth

"Observe, don't obsess. It's useful to keep an eye on growth but I should have observed what was in front of me, which was a happy and healthy baby."

- Dally, mum to Jaivin, born at 35 weeks

You will probably have discussed your baby's growth with your neonatal team during your baby's stay in the unit. Their progress should be plotted in their handheld health record (red book) but if this hasn't happened, or you don't have a copy, ask your Health Visitor or GP.

Babies born preterm are often born small and may not put on a lot of weight while in the neonatal unit. However, they will gradually catch up in their own time or continue to put on weight along their own growth curve. Either of these growth patterns is OK.

Trying to persuade or force your baby to eat or drink more than they want to at mealtimes, or by giving extra bottles as 'dream feeds', does not help them learn to eat and will not make them grow faster. If they have a lot of milk from a dream feed, they will just take less milk and/or solid food the next day.

If you have concerns about your baby's growth, discuss them with your Health Visitor or GP.



7. Things to remember when weaning your baby

This section contains a quick summary of some of the key things to remember from our weaning information.

Some cues that your baby is ready to start weaning

- Your baby can sit up by themselves, needing only a little support
- They can hold their head up easily and keep it upright when sitting
- They explore objects with their fingers, hands, and mouth
- They are beginning to bite and chew on toys
- They reach and grasp for food and/or open their mouth when food is offered

Some cues that are often mistaken for a baby being ready to begin weaning

- Your baby is drinking more milk - this may be a sign they are going through a growth spurt and need more milk

rather than solids. It's OK to give more milk when your baby asks for it.

- Waking up more at night – this may also be a sign of a growth spurt (see point above) or moving to a new developmental stage. Studies show that weaning doesn't help babies sleep longer at night.
- Your baby reaches a certain weight – there is no specific weight that your baby needs to be to start weaning.
- Your baby has teeth – there is huge variation in the age at which babies' teeth come through, but this is not connected to their readiness for solid food.

Useful dates to know

- Start weaning when your baby is showing cues, usually at around six months corrected age
- Avoid starting before five months corrected age
- Try to introduce some mashed or textured foods to your baby by around seven months corrected age

Choosing foods for weaning

- As your baby progresses with weaning, offer a variety of flavours, textures and tastes
- Use as many homecooked family meals as you can
- If you plan to give your baby a vegetarian or vegan diet, ask your Health Visitor for support and advice
- Avoid salty or sugary foods, and adding salt, sugar, or honey when preparing meals for your baby
- Cooked or raw mashed soft fruit with skin and pips or stones removed such as apple, pear, peach, banana, or avocado
- Cooked, mashed split lentils without skins
- Scrambled or mashed boiled eggs (using your baby's usual milk to mash) - make sure they have the Red Lion Stamp on them
- Cooked, soft or pureed meat or fish, mixed with baby rice or vegetables

Some ideas for first foods

- Baby rice (made up with your baby's usual milk), either on its own or with cooked fruit or vegetables
- Cooked, starchy, mashed vegetables such as potato, sweet potato or yam
- Other vegetables cooked and mashed such as carrot, broccoli, or squash

Some ideas for finger foods

- Ripe and peeled soft fruit, like banana, pear or peach (with seeds or stones removed)
- Cooked soft vegetables, like carrot, courgette, parsnip or sweet potato
- Well-cooked shredded meat, or flaked fish with all the bones removed
- Fingers of toast, pitta bread or chapatti, with butter or a similar spread*
- Well-cooked pasta shapes
- Pieces of falafel or garlic bread**
- Cheese, either in thin slices or grated**

*This can help your baby swallow these foods more easily but you don't need to add much. You can offer these foods to them dry when they are more skilled at eating.

**Some of these foods can contain a lot of salt, so don't give to them too often. Also remember to avoid adding salt to any cooking water.

Other things to remember

- Most importantly, enjoy mealtimes with your baby. They are a great opportunity to learn about food and eating, especially when the family eats together.
- Go at your baby's own pace and don't worry if it seems slow.
- Stay with your baby and watch them during mealtimes.
- Encourage your baby to touch and explore food during mealtimes.
- Follow your baby's cues and stop offering more if they show signs that they don't want to try food or aren't hungry.
- Forcing your baby to eat can upset them and make them refuse food.
- Adding solids to your baby's bottle or feeding pureed food

directly from a pouch doesn't give your baby the opportunity to learn the skills they need to eat.

- If you are worried about your baby's progress with weaning discuss this with your Health Visitor or GP.





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