

Weaning

This guide offers support and advice on introducing your child to solid foods, commonly referred to as weaning. It provides practical tips and information to help you navigate this important milestone in your child's development.

The current guidelines recommend that you start the weaning process when your baby is around six months old.

Is your baby ready?

The NHS website shares three signs that may mean your child is ready for solids. They'll be able to:

1. Stay in a sitting position and hold their head steady
2. Co-ordinate their eyes, hands and mouth so they can look at the food, pick it up and put it in their mouth by themselves
3. Swallow food (rather than spit it back out).



The website also shares common signs that can be mistaken for a baby being ready for solid foods. These behaviours are not indicators of a baby being ready for weaning:

- Chewing fists
- Waking in the night when they have previously slept through
- Wanting extra milk feeds.

These are normal behaviors and not necessarily a sign of hunger, or a sign of being ready to start solid food. Starting solid foods won't make them any more likely to sleep through the night. Extra milk feeds are usually enough until they're ready for solid food.

Top tips for weaning include:

- Always supervise your baby - never leave your baby alone with food
- Take it slow - follow your child's pace and avoid force-feeding. Consult your health visitor if you are concerned about their eating
- Create positive associations - ensure that your baby associates food and mealtimes with pleasure rather than stress
- Be prepared for mess - let babies explore and make a mess. Cover floors to make clearing up easier

- Routine - include your baby in family mealtimes so they can see others eating and become part of the routine
- Use a highchair - make sure your child is sat up properly when feeding to reduce the risk of choking
- Healthy diet - provide a wide range of healthy foods to establish good eating habits early
- Variety - offer a mix of colours, textures and flavours to make food appealing. For example, mashed potato and cheese sauce have the same color and texture, but adding pureed carrot may make it more inviting
- Choking awareness - learn what to do in a situation when your baby is choking or, as is more common, gagging. A health visitor, nurse or a doctor will quickly be able to show you or you could complete a Paediatric First Aid course
- Messy play - if you are using food for sensory or messy play then use the same weaning and choking guidelines and supervise carefully.

What to feed your baby

Refer to NHS guidelines for detailed information about the types of food you should try, categorised by age groups. There are some examples below:

From 6 months:

- Mashed, cooked fruit and vegetables like parsnip, potato, yam, sweet potato, carrot, apple or pear, all cooled before eating, or soft fruits like peach, melon, soft ripe banana or avocado as finger foods
- Baby rice or baby cereal mixed with your baby's usual milk
- Keep feeding your child breast milk or infant formula as well, but don't give them whole cow's milk as a drink until they after 12 months of age.

From 12 months:

- Your baby will now be eating three meals a day, chopped if required, plus breast milk or whole cow's milk and healthier snacks like fruit, vegetable sticks, toast and rice cakes
- They can now drink whole cow's milk. Choose full-fat dairy products because children under two need the extra fat and vitamins found in them. From two years old, if they are a good eater and growing well, they can have semi-skimmed milk. From five years old, 1% fat and skimmed milk is suitable
- You can give your baby:
 - Three to four servings a day of starchy food such as potatoes, bread and rice
 - Three to four servings a day of fruit and vegetables
 - Two servings a day of meat, fish, eggs, dhal or other pulses (beans and lentils).

If your child attends nursery

Your child's key person should communicate daily about your child's milk and food intake. Inform the nursery when you begin weaning so you can work together to meet your child's needs. Nurseries should have healthy eating policies available and may either provide food or require you to bring it. If the nursery provides food, their menu will be displayed allowing you to review their meal options to ensure they offer a healthy, balanced diet over the week.

Meal times

Mealtimes should be happy, social times that encourage early social skills such as feeding themselves, conversations with others and taking turns. Babies and young children may take their time eating; allow time for your baby to explore new textures, tastes and smells as this helps them decide what food and flavours they prefer.

Food refusal and selective eaters

It's natural to worry if your child sometimes refuses to eat, but many young children go through phases of choosing what they do and do not want to eat as they explore their choices. Focus on their weekly, rather than daily, intake. If your child is active, gaining weight, and healthy, they're likely getting enough food. Provide a balanced diet with starchy foods, fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, eggs, beans, and dairy. Disguise disliked foods in favourite dishes if needed, and gradually introduce new foods over time.

The Eatwell Plate shows the proportions needed for a balanced diet.



Top tips to support food refusal or selective eaters include:

- **Eat together** - let your child can see you eating the same foods. Make mealtimes fun and sociable. Engage in conversations beyond just the food to distract them and support their social skills and language development
- **Portion size** - serve age-appropriate portions. It's better to give smaller portions and praise for eating some; you could always serve more if they would like it
- **Stay calm** - avoid forcing them to eat and try not to get frustrated. If they refuse, simply take the food away to prevent eating from becoming a stressful issue
- **Timing** - avoid meal times when your child is tired
- **Allow extra time** - whenever possible, allow extra time for relaxed, social meals
- **Limit snacks** - avoid giving too many snacks between meals
- **Rewards** - avoid using puddings, desserts or sweets as rewards for eating all their main meal.

If your child attends nursery, discuss any eating concerns with their key person. They will monitor your child's food and drink intake and share this with you daily. If your child is refusing to eat or not eating enough at nursery, share your home strategies with them to create a consistent plan for encouraging better eating habits. It's also helpful to share these strategies with other family members, like grandparents, if they also care for your child.

If you feel your child is not gaining weight, then see your health visitor or doctor who will be able to offer further support and referrals.

More information

- How to start weaning: NHS Start for Life - NHS <https://bit.ly/48yhM5n>
- Weaning questions answered: BBC Tiny Happy People <https://bit.ly/48AgIDy>
- Eatwell guide <https://bit.ly/3YDRry2>

Recipes

- Recipes and meal ideas: NHS Start for Life <https://bit.ly/3YTMd2w>
- Weaning recipes: BBC Tiny Happy People <https://bit.ly/4fBnIwT>
- Baby Food Recipes: Ella's Kitchen <https://bit.ly/4fcPVdy>

Choking and gagging advice

- What gagging sounds and looks like: BabyCentre <https://bit.ly/3Uzmavi>
- How to save a choking baby: British Red Cross <https://bit.ly/3NWW1Ta>