

When it's time to start giving babies their first solid foods it can be hard to know where to begin. Should the given food be blended smooth or textured? Should the feeding approach be baby led or spoon fed? Which foods should be given and which avoided? Add to this the amount of different advice online and off and it's no wonder that many are confused at a time that should be enjoyable. This fact sheet covers the basics to help get things started and points you in the direction of some useful resources...

Baby Led or Spoon Fed?

One topic that has always been a little controversial when it comes to weaning is which "style" to choose.

Baby Led Weaning (aka BLW) is one approach where you offer baby food that they can clasp and hold enabling them to feed themselves – no pureés involved. Some research has found that this method of feeding doesn't increase choking risk – something that we all worry about as parents.¹ In fact, the highest choking risk was found amongst those children who were given finger foods least often.¹

Spoon feeding traditionally starts with a very thin pureé which gradually gets thicker over the first few weeks of feeding. Some research has shown that infants fed using spoon feeding have higher intakes of iron, zinc and vitamin B12 compared to those who fed themselves using the baby led approach – possibly because of the wider variety of foods that tend to be given.²

So, what's the best approach? In reality it needn't be one or another - a mixture of both methods can work well. So spoon feeding main meals and having finger foods for snacks and meal accompaniments. Some parents find that their baby either won't take a spoon, or that they simply refuse to feed themselves, so in these cases you may not have much of a choice. It goes unsaid, however, whichever method you use, never leave a young child nibbling by themselves.

Foodie Timings

So which foods should be given first? Things have changed since Generation X and the baby boomers fed us. The new way to go is to adopt a 'vegetables first, frequently and in variety' approach.³

When babies are given their first foods this is an extremely sensitive period and great opportunity to programme their palates towards a liking for veg! Vegetables can be given as pureés or finger foods if babies are showing signs that they are ready for food (see our preparing to wean fact sheet). The World Health Organization advises that foods should be given in a way that is appropriate to the individual child.⁴ This means that foods offered should be the right texture and take a form that the child can easily cope with.



We've had plenty of feedback from parents pinpointing just how confusing a time the introduction of first foods can be. So here is a simple and practical guide to help get things started.

Table 1: Getting Started - First Foods.

From 6 months⁵

First Foods

You can mix pureed vegetables or baby rice into some of your babies' usual milk. Peas, broccoli and green beans are good for starters (read our Green Foods First fact sheet). Ripe avocado also has a nice neutral taste profile. Mashed or soft cooked sticks of vegetables like parsnip, potato, yam, sweet potato, butternut squash, carrot (all cooled before eating) can also work well as first foods.

After introducing vegetables (and you may need to do this several times before they really like them!) then try introducing some fruits. Soft peach or melon, ripe banana and pear tend to be firm favourites with little ones (check out our Foodie Fingers fact sheet too!).

At this stage it's all about giving your baby small tastes of a variety of different foods.



Moving on

Soft cooked meat, mashed fish (check carefully for any bones), beans and pulses, wholegrain pasta, rice, bread, pieces of chapatti, lentils and mashed hard boiled eggs can be given next. Full fat dairy products such as yogurt, fromage frais or custard (choose products with no added sugar) can also be offered. Full fat cows' milk can be used in cooking or mixed with food from 6 months.

Between 6 and 8 months your baby will eat about 2-3 times a day.⁴

From 8-9 months⁵

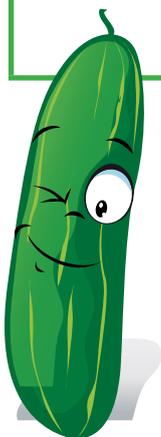
By the time a child is 8 to 9 months they will be eating 3 times a day. This will now be a mixture of finger foods with mashed and chopped foods.

Between 9 and 11 months your baby will eat about 3-4 times a day.⁴

From 12 months⁵

By the time a child is 12 months they will be eating the same as the rest of the family but as smaller portions. Food will probably be chopped with some texture to it. Children can now drink whole cows' milk and have full fat dairy products. Don't be afraid to give children under the age of 2 years full fat dairy as they need the extra fat and vitamins found in these. From 2 years onwards if they are eating and growing well they can begin to have semi-skimmed milk.

Between 12 and 24 months your baby will eat about 3-4 times a day along with nutritious snacks 1-2 times per day.⁴

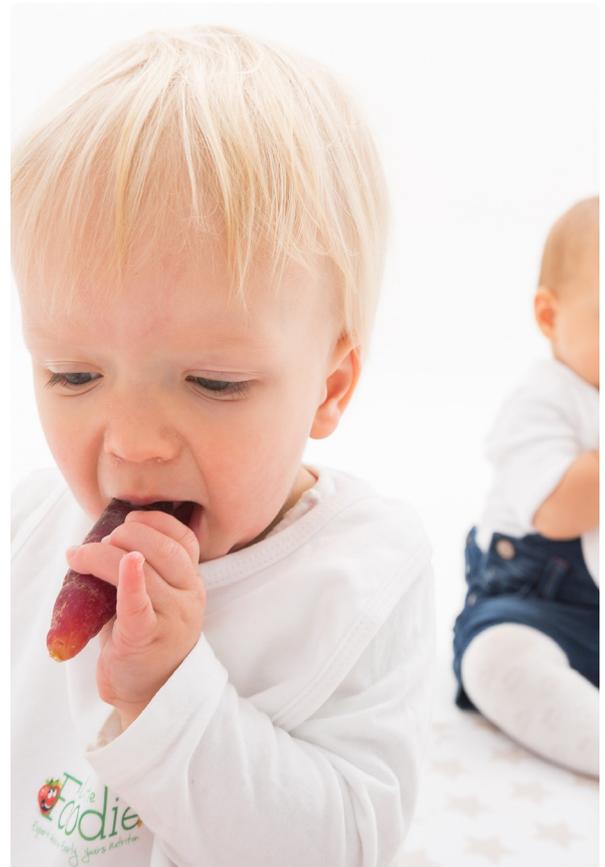


Foodie Cautions.

There may be a small chance that young children could have food allergies. Foods that babies could be allergic to (cows' milk, eggs, gluten, nuts and seeds, fish and shellfish) should not be given before 6 months and initially given one by one so that potential allergies can be identified.⁵ Also, as young children don't yet have a full set of gnashes and lack experience with foods, some foods are best avoided or prepared in a certain way. So here is a list of things to bear in mind.

Table 2: Foodie cautions for young children.

Foodie Cautions for young children	
Added sugar.	It's important to avoid encouraging a sweet tooth for baby from an early age. See our "Green Stuff First" fact sheet for more information. Avoid giving foods or drinks containing added sugars.
Added salt.	It's important not to add any salt to your foods at home as baby's small kidneys cannot cope with this.
Eggs.	You can give eggs to children once they're over six months old. The Food Standards Agency has recently confirmed that British Lion eggs can be eaten safely a bit runny. ⁷
Grapes, cherry tomatoes, large berries, raw jelly cubes.	These can be choking hazards. ⁸ Small fruits should be sliced long ways (see diagram). Always watch when your child is eating.
Honey.	Honey can contain a bacteria that results in a very rare but very serious condition called infant botulism. It is best not to give a child honey until they are 12 months old. Honey is also a sugar and it is recommended that sugars are kept to a minimum in an infant's diet to help prevent your child getting tooth decay. ⁸
Low fat foods.	Babies need nutrients, including fat to grow and so it's important when offering dairy foods to offer full fat versions. Whole milk isn't suitable as a drink until one year however, but can be added to foods from 6 months. ⁵
Raw shellfish	These may increase the risk of food poisoning, so it's best not to give them to a young child. ⁸
Saturated fat.	Avoid giving young children too many foods that are high in saturated fat, such as biscuits, cakes and crisps ⁸
Shark, swordfish, marlin.	Avoid giving young children these varieties of fish as they can have high levels of mercury in them which can affect the development of a young child's nervous system. ⁸
Whole nuts.	These shouldn't be given until a child is 5 years of age, due to the risk of choking. However, as long as there is no history of allergies in your family, nut butters or crushed nuts are fine from 6 months of age. ⁸



Chopping Fruits



Little Foodie Facts

- o First foods given in the early stages of feeding don't need to be 'eaten up'. It's more about 'first tastes' in the early days and less about finishing the dish.
- o In one study vegetable intakes in 1-year olds were a third higher when they had been given vegetables first during weaning.⁹
- o When it comes to weaning mix things up. Research shows that eating a variety of fruit and vegetables early on can help to improve their diet quality later on.¹⁰

TOP TIPS WHEN GIVING FIRST FOODS:

1. Do what works and don't compare – fit our suggestions into your own lifestyle, remembering that every baby is different
2. Don't presume they won't like certain foods - some foods will be eaten easily and others will take more perseverance.
3. Don't give up. It can take more than 10 exposures before some foods such as vegetables are accepted by little ones.¹¹
4. Eat with your child so the sole focus is not on their food and have fun eating and exploring new foods together.
5. Let your baby guide you on feeding pace - by all means follow guidelines, but remember that every child is different.



Conclusions

Giving children their first foods is a wonderful experience – seeing their reactions to those very first flavours. It can, however, also be a rather confusing and daunting time. The vegetables first, frequently and in variety concept sums things up really well. Once the veggies are well accepted you can then move on to fruits and the other food groups. Progress at a pace that's comfortable for you and your child and most importantly - have plenty of foodie fun! We would also love to see any pics of your #littlefoodies trying out their first foods

Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

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Further Information: www.littlefoodie.org

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