

Introducing Solids

When to start

I am often asked about the best time to start a baby on solids. It really depends on the baby but is usually between four and six months. Although age is an important consideration you should also consider the growth of your baby. Your instincts as to your baby's needs, gained from watching and listening to your baby, are a good gauge too. If they have been happy and contented, are between 4 to 6 months and change to being unsettled or needy – this may be a sign of being hungry.

Remember your desire for your baby to sleep through the night is not a reason to introduce your baby to solids before he/she is showing signs of readiness. After all, the cause of your baby's waking may have nothing to do with hunger.

What food to introduce first

The first food I introduce is baby rice. Why? Baby rice is gluten free and therefore most babies find it easy to digest. It is also bland, which makes it ideal as a first food. It is mixed with breast milk or formula to a consistency of a thick runny custard.

What type of rice you choose to start with is a personal choice. I like to start with wholemeal rice or a mixture of wholemeal and white rice; using plain white baby rice as my last choice. With today's focus on healthy eating, I believe it is a good idea to start the habits that you want your baby to continue with throughout their childhood and into adulthood.

Most babies can tolerate rice, however if you do have a SILENT reflux baby this may not be the right food to start with. Use another cereal such as oatmeal and blend it down to the appropriate consistency or start with another baby cereal that you can purchase over the counter. Other cereals to consider are either quinoa and millet. Just ensure you read the labels to ensure they are gluten free.

Be aware that baby rice can also constipate some babies. If this becomes a problem then I would suggest adding pureed prunes to his/her rice in the morning. Start with one teaspoon of puree pulp mixed with baby rice and increase if required.

Which mealtime to introduce first

What time of day you start to introduce solids is entirely up to you and your baby. Some people recommend starting with lunch however this does not seem logical to me – when you introduce the second meal its not evenly balanced through the day. I take the following approach to introducing a mealtime schedule:

One Meal

Start with either the midmorning feed 10.00am (breakfast) or the evening 5.00pm (dinner time).

Babies tend to be hungrier either at the morning or early evening feed, so by observing your baby you will work out which mealtime will work best for him/her.

Two Meals a Day

To graduate to two meals a day I introduce the opposite time from the first meal already introduced. For example, if I have started the baby off with breakfast then I choose dinner. At this stage, I again give baby rice. Overfeeding at this stage of life is unlikely if you follow my recommendations. It is only likely to arise if your baby is constantly being fed to try to settle them.

If your baby is disinterested with just eating rice then you may want to change the breakfast from rice to oatmeal, or you could introduce a small amount of fruit for the morning feed. The ratio I use here is 1 tablespoon of cereal to 1 teaspoon of fruit.

Third Meal of the Day

By this stage, your baby is enjoying breakfast and dinner. So, now introduce lunch around 2.00pm, making the meals evenly balanced throughout the day.

For me, the introduction of lunch coincides with the inclusion of vegetables in your baby's diet. You want your baby to enjoy vegetables so at this stage keep fruit to a minimum. I recommend avoiding fruit entirely initially as if they get the taste of sweetness too early you may find it difficult to establish vegetables later on.

The Correct Amount of Food

I always measure food out in the beginning so I know exactly how much the baby is getting.

It is often suggested to start with one teaspoon of baby rice and then increase this amount, as the baby demands more. Based on my experience, I have found that the majority of babies I have established on solids are actually hungrier than that. Most want more than one teaspoon or even one tablespoon, so use any information as a guideline and go with what you think your baby needs. Also, your baby will clearly guide you – most babies will clench their lips firmly closed when they don't want anymore.

Should you introduce milk or solids first?

This is a much-debated subject, either way; milk remains an important part of a baby's diet. Once again I listen to the baby and go from there. The following are possible ways of introducing solids:

- Solids first, milk second
- Milk first, solids second
- Part milk, first, solids second and finish off with more milk

I have found that a lot of sleeping issues with babies over the six-month plus age group is because they are filling up on milk and not eating enough solids. They are hungry and like us all, are unable to sleep well if not fully satisfied.

The reason why it is recommended that you give milk before solids is that your baby will drink less milk and therefore will miss out on much needed nutrients and fat from their milk intake. However I firmly believe that a hungry baby wants food and if you mix the milk (that they normally would drink) with rice then they are gaining additional calories, their hunger is being satisfied and the result is a happier baby. Plus you still have the option of offering him/her milk to finish off with at the end of the meal.

It is important to note that the amount of milk that a baby drinks varies from baby to baby and as long as they are happy and contented as well as weeing and pooing regularly then you should feel confident that he/she is getting the right mix.

Introducing New Foods

Apart from the cereal meals I tend to always introduce new foods mid day as you have the rest of the day for any reactions. Until they are well established on foods and are older I do not introduce new foods at the evening meal.

Fruits

When I introduce fruit it is always blended down with baby rice. This is for two reasons: one, fruit on its own doesn't fill their tummies and two, it can lead to the baby only liking sweet foods and therefore, offering vegetables can become a challenge.

I always offer cooked fruit versus raw fruit including bananas, which I bake before mashing. If offering prunes, I boil and then puree these, freezing in ice cubes or small amounts for future use.

Vegetables

I suggest each new food is offered every day over a three-day period, before progressing onto the next food. Using this method, you can cook and puree enough to eat one day, keep enough in the fridge for the next day and freeze for thawing out for the third day.

You can freeze either in ice cube trays or on droplets on cooking paper using a flat tray, then once frozen put in plastic zip lock bags. If food is cooked, frozen and thawed, do not then re-freeze any unused food.

Always measure large tablespoons and remember good hygiene around preparation and cooking. Use the water that food has been boiled in/steamed with to puree your vegetables (except potato).

Babies will get bored very quickly with the same flavours so work through a range of flavours. If your baby does not like something remember to reintroduce it again a little later, perhaps making sure it is not as strong in flavour as the last time.

I do not mix vegetables with fruit, however if you are having great difficulty with getting your baby to eat vegetables, then adding a little fruit to sweeten them can be useful. Remember though to reduce the fruit from the vegetable gradually so your baby does not become reliant on eating vegetables only mixed with fruit.

Take extra care with certain foods

Bananas, apples, avocados, carrots, potatoes can all have an effect on reflux babies so when introducing these foods do so in the middle of the day, that way you can better monitor their effect. Also start with a small amount of the new food blended into established foods that you know your baby is okay with.

In light of increasing concerns over food allergies, there is an array of advice about when to introduce certain foods into a baby's diet. Opinions differ from one medical practitioner to another so it's best to do your research. When you make the decision to introduce a particular food to your baby at the appropriate age recommendation, my advice would be to start with a small amount blended with other foods that you know your baby can tolerate. If there is no adverse reaction, then slowly increase the amount each time that food is given.

If your baby does have an adverse reaction (hives, swelling around the mouth or vomiting) then seek immediate medical advice.

Food Allergy is an immune system response. It occurs when the body mistakes an ingredient in food (usually a protein) as harmful and creates a defense system (antibodies) to fight it. The food allergy symptoms develop when the antibodies are battling the food invading their body.

Food Intolerance is a digestive system response rather than a food allergy response. It occurs when something in a food irritates a baby/child's digestive system or when a baby/child is unable to properly digest or breakdown the food. Most common intolerance is the lactose found in milk and dairy products.

The Drink Debate

You can offer sips of water throughout the day to babies over six months, but remember they only need a little water to quench their thirst.

Juice

Babies do not need to have juice. In fact, I would avoid introducing it into to their diet at all. Many kindergartens and schools now operate a water only policy so sticking with water at home is not only healthier but it makes for an easier transition to preschool/school later on.

If you are going to introduce juice, I recommend not doing so until at least the 18-month mark.

Baby-Led Weaning

This has actually been around for a long time. I teach my mothers that once their baby is sitting in their highchair and eating three meals a day that whatever purees you are giving your baby then you should offer them the finger food (cooked) so that they learn texture, taste and smell.

I find that babies that have both purees and finger food are happy and contented as while they are experimenting with finger food their hunger is being met with the purees.

For the evening meal if you don't have the time to cook fresh food, then offer the puree as a spread on a rice cake, cruskit or toast.

Life-long healthy eating

As you can see, I tend to stick with vegetables for as long as possible when starting out solids and I do not offer three course meals. If you think about it as an adult meal, their first course is veggies and the second course is milk. So, if you decide to offer a pudding then you are actually offering your baby three-course meals. Focus on offering your baby fresh healthy meals that do not include juices or puddings and you are well on the way to teaching your child life-long healthy eating habits.

One Meal Progressing to Three Meals a Day

Plan	Early Morning	Nap	Breakfast	Nap	Early Afternoon (lunch)	Nap	Early evening (dinner)	Bedtime routine
One Meal a Day (breakfast)	Milk		Cereal mixed with milk. Offer milk after meal		Milk		Milk	After dinner, 1. Bath 2. Dressed 3. Read, one story 4. Top up bottle – let them drink as much as they want 5. Clean teeth 6. Sleeping bag 7. Into bed awake or semi awake
One Meal a Day (Dinner)	Milk		Milk		Milk		Cereal mixed with milk. Offer milk after meal	
Two meals a Day	Milk		Cereal mixed with milk. Offer milk after meal		Milk		Cereal mixed with milk. Offer milk after meal	
Three Meals a Day	Milk		Cereal mixed with milk. Offer milk after meal		Vegetables		Cereal mixed with milk. Offer milk after meal	

The information given in this chart should be treated as a guideline only. Every baby is unique so his/her individual needs and your lifestyle should be taken into account when establishing a desired routine.