



TIPS FOR WEANING

Taking your first steps into the weaning world can be daunting, especially when faced with mountains of conflicting advice and opinions.

WHERE TO START?

Breast or formula will provide all the nutrients your baby needs for the first six months, which is when the UK Department of Health states that babies should start weaning. Having said that, babies do develop at different rates and the Department advises that if your baby is showing signs of being ready to move on from just breastfeeding or formula then you could try giving some simple solids.

If you feel your baby is ready before then have a chat with your midwife or healthcare professional, although do not start weaning before 17 weeks as your baby's digestive system will not be fully mature for the first few months.

Transitions to solids are more about introducing food than giving a full meal. Parents sometimes make the mistake of giving food when their babies are hungry, when really they need a milk feed. Giving too much solids too quickly may lead to constipation which can be distressing to them.

Up until now your baby has been comfortable with milk but if you spot signs of them being hungrier than usual even after their milk feed or waking in the night, it may be an indicator that they're ready to move on to solids.

Babies between the age of six and 12 months should still have 500 to 600ml of milk a day. Breast or formula should be given as your baby's main milk as it's richer in vitamins and iron than cow's milk - however you can give cow's milk with cereal or in cooking from six months. Stick to full-fat milk as the calories will help fuel your baby's growth and perhaps start to give some of their milk in a cup.

FIRST FOODS: VEGETABLES

Root vegetables are at the very core of weaning. They're easy to digest and unlikely to provoke an allergic reaction. The best way to cook them to preserve their nutrients is to steam them so that they puree into a smooth texture. Sweet potato, butternut squash and parsnips are great because they have a naturally sweet taste, a similar sweetness to breast-milk.

Combining fruit with savoury was my secret weapon when I was weaning my son Nicholas. He liked eating apples but wouldn't eat chicken so I made combinations like chicken, sweet potato and apple which he loved.

FIRST FOODS: FRUITS

With fruit it's important to choose fruits that are ripe and have a good flavour so try tasting them yourself before giving them to your baby. Good first fruits are apple and pear which can be steamed or cooked in a saucepan. There are also some fruits like bananas, avocados and peaches which don't require any cooking at all and you can just mash with a fork.

Once you have introduced single ingredient purees you can make combinations like apple and pear, avocado and banana or peach and banana.

FOODS TO AVOID AND ALLERGIES

Certain foods are unsuitable to give to a baby. Foods that should be avoided until your baby is at least 12 months old are:

- **Salt**

Don't add salt to your baby's food and don't use stock cubes or gravy, as they're often high in salt. Remember this when you're cooking for the family, if you plan to give the same food to your baby.

- **Sugar**

Your baby doesn't need sugar. By avoiding sugary snacks and drinks (including fruit juice and other fruit drinks), you'll help to prevent tooth decay. Use mashed banana or other fruits, breast milk or formula milk to sweeten food, if needed.

- **Honey**

Occasionally, honey contains bacteria that can produce toxins in a baby's intestines, leading to infant botulism which is a very serious illness. It's best not to give your child honey until they're one year old. Honey is a sugar, so avoiding it will also help to prevent tooth decay.

- **Nuts**

Whole nuts, including peanuts, shouldn't be given to children under five, as they can choke on them. As long as there's no history of food allergies or other allergies in your family, you can give your baby peanuts once they're six months old, as long as they're crushed or ground into peanut butter.

- **'Low-fat' foods**

Fat is an important source of calories and some vitamins for babies and young children. It's better for babies and young children under two to have full-fat milk, yoghurt and cheese, rather than low-fat varieties.

- **Shark, swordfish and marlin**

Don't give your baby shark, swordfish or marlin. The amount of mercury in these fish can affect a baby's growing nervous system.

- **Raw shellfish**

Raw shellfish can increase the risk of food poisoning, so it's best not to give it to babies.

- **Raw and undercooked eggs**

Eggs can be given to babies over six months old, but make sure they're cooked until both the white and yolk are solid.

ALLERGIES

Childhood food allergies seem to be on the increase, so it's natural that some parents might be nervous about introducing foods that could cause problems.

However, it's worth noting that the actual incidence of food allergy in babies is very small - about 6%. Many babies grow out of allergies like cow's milk allergy by the age of 2 or 3.

New advice is not to withhold foods like eggs from six months. Giving these foods helps to desensitise babies. An example of this is in Israel where young children regularly eat Bamba – a snack which contains peanuts, and over there they actually have a very low case of peanut allergies. The best thing you can do is to introduce new foods one by one, leaving a day or two between each one, to see if there's a reaction.

Food allergies are more common among babies and children from families with a history of food allergy. Babies who suffer from eczema are also a high risk of suffering from food allergies. Babies who develop severe eczema before the age of three months are at very high risk, so you need to be particularly cautious when introducing new foods.

GETTING PREPARED

Planning ahead is a great way of ensuring you have everything you need and can save you lots of stress on a busy day.

Batch cooking was my saviour! It can be difficult to blend such a small quantity of food so prepare purees in large batches and freeze individual portions in ice cube trays. Be sure to label them clearly with the contents and date so you don't get them muddled up.

When it comes to defrosting, take the puree out overnight and reheat in a saucepan or microwave – stirring thoroughly to remove any hot spots. Never refreeze a puree that has already been frozen and do not reheat foods more than once.

HERE ARE MY TOP TIPS FOR WEANING VICTORY:

Invest in a weaning spoon

Babies instinctively push their tongue forwards so to help them swallow use a shallow weaning spoon. If she can't get on with it, try dipping a clean finger in the puree and let her suck your finger.

How to blend

I generally blend baby purees using a hand held electric blender. However this doesn't work for potato as it becomes sticky as the starches break down so it's best to put potato through a mouli, a hand turned blender or potato ricer.

Get into a routine

It's a good idea to choose a spot where you'll be regularly feeding your baby, so that she begins to associate it with mealtimes. The kitchen is probably best, as she's bound to make a considerable mess for the first few months – or even years!

Have fun

Remember to laugh, smile, sing and taste your baby's food as she'll want to join in the fun by copying you and eating it herself.

Give new foods at lunchtime

Try new foods around lunchtime so that their evening sleep isn't disturbed and you can have a peaceful night as the darker evenings draw in (well... hopefully!).

Introduce finger foods

Once your baby is able to hold food in her hand and chew you can try giving soft finger foods like banana or pear that dissolve in the mouth. The more you allow your baby to experiment with feeding herself the quicker she will master the art.

Happy weaning!