Nutrition for babies

The first 12 months of life is the fastest growth period in a human’s life – a baby’s weight can triple by twelve months of age. Making sure your baby is fed properly is critical for normal growth and development. Breast milk is preferable as the sole source of nutrition up until about 6 months, or infant formula if you are unable to breastfeed. The Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) state that at 6 months of age, your baby needs additional iron from food and is physically ready to take on the challenge of learning to eat. Breast milk or formula, however, continues to be the most important source of nutrition. By about 12 months, your baby should be eating foods similar to those eaten by the whole family. This includes breads and cereals, fruit, vegetables, legumes, dairy foods, meat, fish and eggs.

When should food be first offered?

Around the age of 6 months, your baby’s digestive system, swallowing ability and tongue control are mature enough to cope with some solids. You will also notice your baby watching you eat and wanting to put things in his or her mouth. These are signs that your baby is ready to start solid food.

What foods should be offered first?

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents recommend that a rice-based infant cereal is a good food to start with. Make sure your infant cereal is fortified with iron, as your baby’s stores of iron begin to run low at about 6 months of age. Once rice cereal is tolerated and enjoyed, vegetables and fruit can be offered. Vegetables such as potato, pumpkin, carrot and zucchini, and fruits such as stewed apple and pear, are commonly offered first. Introduce new foods one at a time and wait a couple of days before trying another new food. This will make it easier to isolate any foods that may cause a reaction.

The Royal Children’s Hospital at Westmead, NSW advises that meat and chicken can be introduced from around 7 months. Oat- and wheat-based cereals can also be introduced from 7 to 8 months, as can rice, pasta and toast. Cooked egg can be introduced between 10 and 11 months. It is often recommended that children with a family history of allergy should delay the introduction of potentially allergenic foods (such as egg, peanuts, nuts, wheat, milk and fish). However, recent studies suggest that avoiding allergenic foods does not reduce allergies, and may even be linked with an increased risk of allergies. If there is a known family history of allergy, consult your doctor before introducing solids.

When can dairy foods be offered?

Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt contain at least 10 essential nutrients which are important for the growth and development of your baby. These include vitamin A, vitamin B12, riboflavin, calcium, carbohydrate, magnesium, phosphorus, protein, potassium, and zinc. Dairy foods usually become an important part of a growing baby’s diet.

Milk can be given to your baby in small amounts from about 8 months. Milk should not replace breast milk or formula as the main milk drink, but you can pour it on cereal or make it into custard. Wait until your baby is 12 months before offering milk as a drink. Because milk is already pasteurised, there is no need to boil it before giving it to your baby. Longlife milk is just as nutritious as fresh milk and is also safe to offer.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents advise that reduced fat milk is not suitable for children below 2 years of age. For children below the age of 2 years, milk fat is an important source of energy, certain vitamins and important types of fat. The fat content of milk becomes less important as children grow older because other foods are eaten that contribute these vitamins and fats to their diet.

Yogurt can be offered when your baby is around 8 months old. Cheese can also be introduced at around 8 months. Choose the regular fat varieties. Cheese can be grated over vegetables or used in a cheese sauce with meat. It serves as a great nutritious snack once your baby can manage eating foods with his or her hands. Also try melting some cheese on toast or make some cheese muffins.

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**What should the food texture be like?**

As your baby grows older, food should be blended less to help your baby learn to chew. At first, foods should be puréed or finely mashed. By around 7 to 8 months, your baby should be ready for roughly mashed foods with small, soft lumps. Once your baby is able to hold things, finger foods can be offered with each meal. By twelve months, your baby should be able to manage chopped or diced foods. To prevent choking, avoid small hard pieces of food such as nuts and uncooked vegetables and always supervise your child during feeding times.

**How much food should be offered?**

When introducing a new food into your baby's diet, only offer a teaspoon at a time. Slowly build up the amount until your baby eats one or two tablespoons. Remember that these first foods are not to fill your baby up, but rather to help him or her learn to eat. Don’t try to force-feed. Babies will usually tell you when they have had enough by either turning their heads away or refusing to open their mouths.

**Should low fat foods be offered?**

Low fat diets are not recommended for children under 2 years of age. Babies and young children grow very rapidly and need the fat supplied in whole milk, cheese and yogurt, and in foods such as eggs and meat, to give the energy they need for growth and development. Young children also need some fat in their diet to provide the essential fatty acids required for healthy brain development.

**What about fruit juice?**

Fruit juice is not necessary in a baby’s diet. The nutrients contained in juice are better obtained from fresh fruit, which also adds fibre to the diet. Fruit juice, including unsweetened juice, is high in sugar and can contribute to tooth decay. In large amounts it can even cause diarrhoea.

**What about lactose intolerance?**

Lactose intolerance is very rarely seen in infants. Breast milk actually contains a high amount of lactose (more than the amount in cow’s milk). Lactose intolerance can occur after a severe stomach upset (gastroenteritis) but once your child is well again, dairy foods can be gradually reintroduced. Most children with lactose intolerance will still be able to eat at least some dairy foods. Yogurt contains natural bacteria that can help digest lactose. Cheese contains virtually no lactose and small amounts of milk may be tolerated with meals. If you believe your child may be lactose intolerant, see a GP to get a professional diagnosis.

**Growing from infants to toddlers**

Your child should be learning to eat a varied diet and enjoying food. It’s well known that children’s behaviour reflect the habits of their parents. Set a healthy example by enjoying a diet containing plenty of fruit, vegetables, cereals, dairy foods and lean meats. Dairy foods naturally provide significant amounts of nutrients for growing bodies.

For personal assistance with feeding your infant and planning a healthy family diet contact an Accredited Practising Dietitian or visit the Dietitian’s Australia Association website www.daa.asn.au.

Nutrition recommendations are based on the National Health and Medical Research Council’s *Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents*, unless otherwise stated.