



March 2006

BABY'S FIRST FOOD

Vegetarian diet

The following information is appropriate for infants who will be weaned onto a vegetarian diet including dairy products and eggs. For infants who will be weaned onto a diet without any animal products (a vegan diet), discussion with a Doctor or Dietitian is essential.

When should you start solids?

Breast or infant formula is important for babies until at least 12 months of age, but it is essential that solid foods also be introduced at the right time.

By about six months of age, a baby's iron stores are low and extra foods will be needed to prevent later nutritional problems such as iron deficiency.

Start to introduce solids at around six months of age.

Babies on a vegetarian diet may need to continue breast feeding or infant formula until 2 years of age to ensure adequate iron intake.

Can you start solids too early or too late?

Young babies have immature digestive systems and are unable to handle foods other than breast milk or formula. Some parents want to try solids before four months believing this may help baby grow, sleep or settle better.

Giving solids rarely helps these problems and may lead to:

1. Greater chance of developing allergies
2. Poor growth if the solid food replaces breast milk or formula
3. Loose bowel actions or diarrhoea if baby cannot digest the food.

It is also important that starting solids is not left too late this may lead to:

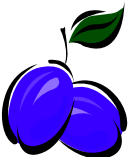
1. Poor growth due to low energy intake
2. Iron deficiency anaemia
3. Feeding problems, particularly if not started before 7-9 months of age.

Signs your baby is ready to start solids

Watching and leaning forward when food is around.

Opening the mouth when food is offered.

Reaching out to grab food or spoons.



When baby is not yet interested or is full, signs may be:

1. Closing the mouth tightly and turning the head away when fed.
2. Crying when food is offered.
3. Pushing the spoon away.

While most babies naturally spit food out when first given solids, they soon learn to swallow if you continue.

How to Begin

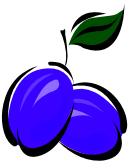
Food should never be placed in a feeding bottle, but given on a small infant sized teaspoon.

Tips for introducing solids include:

1. Make sure your child is sitting comfortably and is not too hungry.
2. Start with a single food rather than a mixture. Infant rice cereal is recommended as it is easy to digest, the correct consistency and fortified with iron. Try half to one teaspoon after a milk feed.
3. If you baby refuses the first time, try again in a day or so.
4. Introduce a new food every few days. Once rice cereal is going well, try small amounts of pureed fruits and vegetables.
5. When your baby is eating fruits and vegetables introduce other cereals (look for iron fortified ones such as Weet-Bix) and protein foods such as mashed legumes and tofu.
6. Start to give small amounts of cow's milk in custard, yoghurt and on cereal.
7. Usually cooked egg yolk can be introduced between 10 and 11 months. Other foods that may cause allergy such as egg white or peanut butter can be given after 11 months. (In the case of a family history of allergy, it is best to wait until after 12 months of age).
8. Avoid small hard foods such as nuts and uncooked vegetables, due to the risk of choking.
9. Be prepared for mess as your baby learns to eat. Newspaper or a plastic tablecloth under the high chair can help.
10. Stay with your baby when he is eating, and sit him with the family to watch and learn feeding skills.
11. Expect to see a change in bowel habits when your baby starts eating foods other than milk.
12. Fruit juice is not required for infants.

What about commercial baby foods?

These foods are always handy to have for emergencies or travelling and contain similar nutrients to fresh food. However, these products are expensive and tend to be a uniform fine texture and contain several foods mixed together. It is important that your baby learns to enjoy coarser textures and individual flavours of foods.



When to change the texture of food

1. Babies begin with runny cereal and puree fruit and vegetables as they are easiest to digest. As babies develop, it is important to grade up the texture to finely mashed and then coarsely mashed.
2. Give finger foods such as pieces of cooked vegetables and crusts at about 7 months.
3. Give baby a small spoon to feed, even while you continue to give most food.
4. Encourage drinking from a cup from about 8 months of age.

Remember

- Babies are all individuals and learn to eat at different rates.
- Not all babies the same age eat the same amounts of foods.
- Learning to eat is just that - a new skill that needs lots of practise.
- Relax and enjoy this stage of your baby's development.

Important points for weaning onto a vegetarian diet.

Although vegetarian diets can be just as nutritious as other diets, there are some nutrients which require special consideration. Without careful planning, the following are likely to be limited in an infant's or child's diet.

Energy (Kilojoules)

It is essential that the vegetarian diet supply enough kilojoules for normal growth and development. When wholegrain cereals and legumes replace meat, diets may become low in fat and energy and high in fibre. This may be an advantage in adults, but is inappropriate in infants and young children who have small appetites.

To avoid this, combine vegetarian foods with higher fat foods to make meals more energy dense.

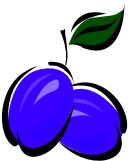
For example:

Use a white or cheese sauce with vegetables.

Add nut butters, avocado, margarine or ricotta cheese to bread or toast and mix with rice and vegetables.

So that your infants appetite is not reduced by bulky high fibre grains, offer a mixture of refined and unrefined grains, white and wholemeal breads and brown and white pasta or rice.

Snacking should be encouraged but should not replace breast feeds or infant formula in young infants.



Protein

Protein is essential for growth and repair of body muscle and tissue.

Protein is made up of different building blocks called amino acids. Protein from animal sources contain all the amino acids our body needs, but those from plants may be low in one or more amino acids. Eating a variety of proteins from various sources is important on a vegetarian diet.

Vitamins and Minerals

For children weaned onto a vegetarian diet, a low iron intake is the greatest concern. Iron is an important mineral involved in the formation of blood and the prevention of anaemia. Iron from plant foods such as wholegrain cereals, green leafy vegetables and legumes is better absorbed if eaten with foods containing Vitamin C such as citrus fruits, fruit juices, tomatoes, capsicum or potatoes. Once your baby is eating a variety of solid foods, these foods should be combined in ways to increase iron absorption.

For example:

Dilute orange juice with iron fortified breakfast cereal or orange segments after a meal.

Other nutrients will be provided by a diet that includes a wide variety of foods. Vitamin B₁₂ only occurs in animal products such as milk and egg.

