

Infant Nutrition

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, so ensuring the baby is well nourished is critical for normal growth and development. Breast milk or formula is the sole source of nutrition up until about 6 months. At this age the baby needs additional iron from food and is physically ready to take on the challenge of learning to eat. Breast milk or formula, however, is still the main source of nutrition. By about 10 to 12 months, the baby should be eating foods similar to those eaten by the whole family. This will include breads & cereals, fruit, vegetables, legumes, dairy foods, meat, fish and eggs.

When should food be first offered to the baby?

Around the age of 6 months, the baby will be ready to start eating solid food. It is at this time that the baby's kidneys, digestive system, immune system, mouth, tongue and head control are strong and mature enough to cope with solids. At around this age you will also notice the baby will start watching you eat and will lean forward and open his or her mouth when food is offered. These are all signs that the baby is ready to start solid food.

What foods should be offered first?

A rice-based infant cereal is a good food to start with. Ensure your infant cereal is fortified with iron, as babies' 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 next. Usually potato, pumpkin, apple and pear, in that order, can be offered first to the baby. It is suggested to trial each food one at a time. Meat and chicken can then be introduced, as can breads, rice & pasta. Fish is a common allergy-causing food so wait until the baby is eight months before offering it. Egg may also cause allergies so offer it once the baby is around nine to ten months of age. Trial the egg yolk first. If there is a known family history of allergy, delay the introduction of fish and eggs until the baby is 12 months of age.

When can dairy foods be offered?

Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt contain over 10 essential nutrients for the baby. These are vitamin A, vitamin B12, calcium, carbohydrate, magnesium, phosphorus, protein, potassium, riboflavin and zinc. Dairy foods therefore become an important part of a growing baby's diet.

Milk can be given to the baby from eight months in small amounts. It can be poured on cereal or made into custard. Milk should not however replace breast milk or formula. Wait until the baby is 12 months before offering milk as the main drink. Because milk is already pasteurised, there is no need to boil it before giving to the baby. Longlife milk is just as nutritious as fresh milk so is safe to offer to the baby.

Yogurt can also be offered when the baby is seven to eight months. Start with plain yogurt mixed with some fruit. Once the baby is used to the taste, other flavours can be offered. There is a huge range of yogurts to select from in the supermarket.

Cheese can be introduced at seven to eight months. Grate it over vegetables or use it in a cheese sauce with meats. It serves as a great nutritious snack once the baby can manage eating foods with his or her hands. Also try melting it on toast or make some cheese muffins.

The *Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children* state that reduced fat and skim milks are not recommended for children less than 5 years of age. Babies and young children need the additional fat to give their growing bodies energy and to help absorb the vitamins A and D found in dairy.

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). Secondary lactose intolerance can occur after a severe bout of gastroenteritis but once the child is well again dairy foods can be gradually reintroduced. Most children with lactose intolerance may still be able to eat lactose. Yogurt contains natural bacteria

that can help to digest lactose. Cheese contains virtually no lactose and small amounts of milk may be tolerated with meals. If you believe a child may be lactose intolerant, please see a doctor or paediatrician to get a professional diagnosis.

What should the food texture be like?

The food texture should be gradually increased to help the baby learn to chew. At first, foods should be pureed or finely mashed. By the time the baby is eight to nine months foods should be mashed roughly. Once the baby is grabbing for food, start to offer finger foods with each meal. Rather than mashing food all the time, cut up food into finger size pieces or grate it. By twelve months the baby should be able to manage cut up meals. To prevent choking, avoid small hard pieces of food such as nuts and uncooked vegetables.

How much food should be offered?

When introducing a new food into the baby's diet, only offer a teaspoon at a time. Slowly build up the amount until the baby can tolerate about one to two tablespoons. It is important to remember that these first foods are not to fill the baby up but rather to help him or her learn to eat. Don't try to force-feed. The baby will usually tell you he or she has had enough by either turning his or her head

away or refusing to open his or her mouth.

Should low fat foods be offered?

Low fat diets are not suitable for young children. Babies and small children have small stomachs 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. Low fat diets are not recommended for children under 5 years of age.

Should the baby have fruit juice?

Fruit juice is not necessary in the baby's diet because the nutrients it can supply are better obtained from fresh fruit. Unlike juice, fresh fruit will also add fibre to the diet. Fruit juice, including unsweetened juice, is high in sugar and can contribute to tooth decay and in large amounts it can even cause diarrhoea. If offering juice, make sure it is diluted with water.

What about mucus production?

Milk does not cause the body to produce mucus. Milk can leave a soft, filmy coating in the mouth or throat. This may be mistaken for mucus, but is simply the milk's natural creamy texture and perhaps some saliva production. This filmy coating is not at all harmful and lasts for only a short period of time.

