

Starting solids for preterm babies

Your baby is considered 'preterm' if they were born before 37 weeks gestation.

- Preterm babies have a corrected age. This is your baby's age from birth (actual age) minus the number of weeks or months early that they were born.
- For example, for a 12-month old born three months early, their corrected age is 9 months (12 months – 3 months = 9 months).
- Corrected age is used until your baby is 2 years of age.

When to start?

Premature babies have different nutrition needs to babies born at term. The general guidelines on starting solids at around six months do not apply to preterm babies. Your baby doesn't need to have teeth for starting solids.

It is recommended to start solids when your baby is around 5 – 7 months of their actual age.

Before starting solids, your baby should be able to:

- Sit with support & hold their head up
- Show interest in people eating food
- Lean towards food and open their mouth
- Put toys/ fingers into their mouth
- Appear alert and ready for a new type of feeding

Starting solids – too soon

It is too early to start solids if your baby is less than 4 months of their actual age, or before 3 months of their corrected age.

- Starting solids too soon could lead to an increased risk of food allergy. Your baby's gut will not be ready for solids.
- Most babies do not have enough control over their tongues and mouth muscles at this age.
- At this age, babies push their tongues against the spoon instead of swallowing food. This tongue-pushing reflex helps babies when they are breastfeeding or drinking from a bottle.

Starting solids – too late

Your baby should be ready to start solids by 7 - 8 months of actual age.

- Your preterm baby is not born with enough iron stores to last 6 months and so they need iron rich foods.
- Your baby may have developed a dislike to having anything but milk in their mouth.
- As your baby gets older they may be less willing to try new flavours and foods. This could lead to feeding problems later on.

How to start?

- Choose a quiet time of the day when your baby is happy (e.g. mid-morning).
- Use a small baby feeding spoon
- Put the food in the middle of their tongue.
- Start with solids that are smooth and runny texture with no lumps.
- If your baby does not enjoy it the first time, leave it until another time.
- Give an infant formula/ breast milk feed first and offer solids as a top up.
- It is important to have your baby in a good supported position to help them with their eating.
- If you are seeing an occupational therapist, they can give you more

advice to support your baby with positioning for feeding.

What foods to start with?

Iron is needed to make red blood cells, which carry oxygen throughout the body. Iron also plays an important role in immunity, brain development and growth. This makes iron supplementation and choosing iron-rich foods very important with starting solids. For example:

- Baby rice/ infant cereals are a good first food because they have extra iron added.
- Iron rich food – for example, pureed red meat, chicken, lamb, liver (2 tsp. per day), kidney, egg, lentils, legumes (i.e. baked beans), cooked tofu.

You may also like to try fruits and vegetables, for example, pureed apple, ripe banana or pureed avocado.

Preparing your baby's foods

- Always wash your hands and utensils before preparing food.
- Try to adapt family meals to a suitable texture for your baby.
- If extra fluid is needed to blend food add infant formula, breast milk or cooled boiled water.
- Freeze small quantities of food in ice cube trays and thaw in the fridge as needed.

- It is important for your baby to try a variety of different tastes and textures, including home-made foods.

Ready-made baby food

- These are a useful alternative occasionally, however they should not be relied upon.
- Readymade baby foods are lower in nutritional value and are expensive.
- Choose a meat or fish product with a content protein of at least 2.5g/100g.
- Vegetable products should have a protein content of at least 2g/100g.
- You can find this information on the nutrition panel on the package/ jar/ pouch.

What drinks to give?

- Continue with breast milk or infant formula while introducing solids to your baby.
- Water can be offered in a 'sippy' or open cup.
- Water should be boiled and cooled for babies under 12 months actual age.
- Full cream cow's milk can be added as a drink after 15 – 18 months actual age.
- Full cream milk can be used in cooking/ added to solids.

How to know when your baby has had enough?

- Turns away head or body from food
- Loses interest in food
- Pushes food away
- Closed mouth
- Looks distressed or cries
- Lip pursing
- Hiccupping/ sneezing

Choking

Always watch your baby while they are eating solids. Foods that are a choking risk include:

- Raw carrot sticks
- Popcorn
- Crisps/chips
- Lollies
- Whole nuts

Adding solids to your baby's bottle can also be a choking risk. Cooking, chopping, mashing and grating foods can help make foods easier to eat.

For more information on choking visit this website:

http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/preventing_choking.html

Guide for starting solids	
About 1 month after starting solids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer three solids meals per day. • Introduce thicker purees and soft dissolvable foods. • Introduce a cup for drinking (by ~ 6 months actual age).
About 2 months after starting solids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer solids before breastfeeds/ infant formula. • Offer drinks (infant formula/ breast milk/ water) from a cup as well as a bottle (by 9-10 months of actual age). • Introduce smooth & mashed consistency foods (~ 9 months actual age) as well as finger foods. • It is important to offer your baby lumpy foods as soon as they are managing well with pureed food.
By 12 months of actual age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your baby should be managing mashed/ chopped family meals. • Your baby should be able to drink from an open cup, training cup (e.g. a “sippy” cup) and no longer need a bottle.
Ideas for finger foods	<p>Encouraging your baby to feed themselves can help them accept more varied textures.</p> <p>They might like to try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ripe peeled soft fruit • Pear, peach, banana • Toast • Slices of cheese • Pasta shapes • Dissolvable crackers/ biscuits

Nutrition Supplements

Your baby may need a multivitamin (Penta-vite®) and an iron supplement (e.g. ferrous) at least until solids are established and possibly until 12 months of actual age.

Enjoyable mealtimes

Remember eating is a new and exciting experience for your baby. Take time to relax and enjoy mealtimes and allow your baby to make a mess!

- Limit distractions during mealtimes such as TV, tablet, mobile phones, pets and toys.
- Try to eat together as a family to make eating enjoyable.

It is normal for your baby to refuse new foods. New foods may need to be offered up to 20 times before they are accepted. Meal times should not take longer than ~30 minutes for your baby.

What to avoid?

- There is no need to add salt or sugar for extra flavour to your baby's foods
- Low fat foods should not be given to your baby before 2yrs of actual age. Fat is a good source of energy for growing babies.

- Do not give honey to your baby before they are 1 year of corrected age as there is a risk of infection.
- Do not give your baby raw egg or raw milk as there is risk of infection
- Never force your baby with solids. All babies will refuse foods at times.
- If you are concerned about food allergies – speak with your Dietitian.

For further information contact your Dietitian or Nutritionist:

References & further resources

1. ASCIA www.allergy.org.au
2. Raising Children's Network <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>
3. "Start them right" A parent's guide to eating for under 5's Tasmanian Government - https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/81769/53063_start_them_right_booklet_spreads.pdf
4. Weaning your premature baby BLISS <https://www.bliss.org.uk>
5. First foods for Preterm Babies, used with permission by Barbara Cormack, Newborn Services, Auckland City Hospital, Auckland, New Zealand - <http://www.adhb.govt.nz/newborn/Guidelines/Nutrition/First%20Foods%20for%20Premature%20Babies%20July%202011.pdf>
6. Joint consensus statement on weaning preterm babies - <http://www.rotherham.nhs.uk/files/Services/Infant%20feeding%20forum/Resources/Joint%20consensus%20statement%20on%20weaning%20preterm%20infants%20-%202010.pdf>