

## Starting Solids for Preterm Babies

Preterm babies are babies that are born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. The general guidelines on starting solids (food) at around 6 months do not apply to preterm babies. This is because they have different nutrition needs than babies born after 37 weeks of pregnancy.

### When to start?

Most healthy preterm babies will be ready to start solids at 5 - 7 months of actual age. Actual age is the age from your baby's date of birth. Corrected age is your baby's age, minus the weeks they were born early. Corrected age is important until they are 2 years old.

**Timing and pace of starting solids is different for each baby.**

### How do I know my baby is ready for solids?

- They are able to hold their head up by themselves and sit up with support (e.g. on your lap or in a highchair)
- They show interest in people eating food
- They lean towards food and open their mouth
- They put toys/fingers into their mouth
- They appear alert and ready for a new type of feeding



### Fill in these dates to help you decide when to start

	Date
<b>3 months corrected age (3 months after <u>due</u> date)</b> The earliest date to start considering solids. Consider the signs above. <u>Many babies will not be ready to start solids yet.</u>	
<b>7 months actual age (7 months after <u>birth</u> date)</b> If your baby is not showing signs of being ready to start solids talk to your doctor.	

### What can go wrong if we start solids too early?

- Increased risk of developing a food allergy. Your baby's gut will not be ready for solids.
- Your baby may not have control of their mouth and tongue, and cannot eat properly.
- Your baby can develop a dislike of eating. Respond to their cues and try not to force them to eat.

## What can go wrong if we start solids too late?

- Your baby may develop a dislike for having anything other than milk in their mouth.
- Your baby may be more fussy and less willing to try new flavours and foods.
- Babies do not have enough iron stores to last more than 6 months, so they need to start getting iron from food. This is different for babies that take an iron supplement from their doctor.

## What foods do I give my baby?

Offer your baby a wide variety of healthy foods, such as:

- Baby cereal with added iron
- Pureed meat, chicken, fish, egg
- Pureed ripe avocado, banana, stewed apple
- Pureed sweet potato, pumpkin, broccoli



See Children's Health Queensland's [Baby's First Foods](#) for what foods to give babies and how to prepare food.

## How much food do I give my baby?

- Give your baby their breastfeed or infant formula followed by solids.
- Start with 1 meal each day when baby is most alert. Slowly build up to 3 times a day.
- Seat your baby in a supported position to help them with their eating.

## How do I prepare my baby's food?

Start with soft and smooth foods. Make food more lumpy as your baby grows.

- After about 1 month since starting solids, introduce mashed foods.
- After about 3 months since starting solids, introduce soft finger foods to hold.

## Why is iron important for preterm babies?

Preterm babies have lower iron stores and are at higher risk of iron deficiency.

**Include foods high in iron every day** to help your baby grow well, such as:

- Baby cereal with iron
- Pureed beef, lamb, goat, kangaroo, eggs, bush meats, chicken, fish
- Tofu, chickpeas, legumes (e.g. baked beans)
- Green leafy vegetables



If your baby requires an iron supplement, continue this until solids are regularly accepted and familiar to your baby. See your doctor before starting or stopping any supplements.

This is a consensus document from Dietitian/ Nutritionists from the Nutrition Education Materials Online, "NEMO", team.  
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