

Baby-led introduction of family foods 2008

This information leaflet is intended as a follow up to “Introduction to Solids” (2005, Gloucestershire Health Promotion, available to download on www.breastfeedingsupporters.org.uk).

This information is from mothers who have attended Gloucestershire Breastfeeding Supporters’ Network (GBSN) breastfeeding support groups who have followed “baby-led weaning” with their babies and wish to share their stories with you. The quotes and pictures are reproduced here with their permission and the grateful thanks of GBSN.



Food is fun!



We take as our starting point the World Health Organisation (WHO) statement that breastmilk is all that a baby needs for at least the first 6 months of life and is the main diet for at least the first year. Therefore keep in mind that each time, *you breastfeed first before offering family foods* to your baby. Sometimes babies can get so excited by the family foods that they forget to have their breastfeeds and wake up in the night to catch up. ***For the first year, family foods complement your breastmilk, not take over.***

When is my breastmilk alone no longer enough?

When your baby is 0-6 months old, your breastmilk provides 100% of his needs and calories.

From 6 – 8 months old, your breastmilk provides 95%.

From 9 – 11 months old, your breastmilk provides 93%.

12 – 24 months old, your breastmilk provides 66% calories.

So your baby has a very small energy need for complementary foods. At 6-8 months your baby needs only about another 200 calories a day which is the equivalent of a piece of bread and butter.

A 9 – 11 month old needs only another 300 calories.

A 12 – 24 month old needs only another 550 calories.

Therefore it's not that you *should* breastfeed for 6 months, it's just that there's no need to do anything else.

(from Butte, 2002 for the World Health Organisation).

What about my baby's gut?

It's also about giving your baby's gut time to mature so that he is more able to cope with solid food. This happens around about 6 months. Introducing solids before this time increases your baby's chances of developing wheeze, asthma and food intolerances. If you have a family history of asthma, hay fever, eczema, food intolerances, allergies you might like to consider delaying introducing family foods until at least 6 months.

How will I recognise that my baby is ready?

- Your baby needs to be able to sit up and hold his head up unaided (think of how you need to keep your head up when you need to swallow your food).
- Your baby needs to be old enough to have lost his tongue thrust reflex (which causes him to thrust a spoon out of his mouth) and this is replaced by him being able to move his tongue around his mouth so helping to make his food into a bolus to be able to swallow.

These happen developmentally around about 6 months.



Any signs that might be misinterpreted as being ready?

- Waking in the night
- Picking things up and putting them to his mouth
- Feeding more and being unsettled
- Baby is bigger than average
- Baby watches you whilst you are eating.

These are developmental stages of all babies from about 4 months and have in the past been misinterpreted as being signs of being ready. *They are not.*

So do I wait until exactly 6 months then?

No, it's also about having a lovely fun time. From any age of baby, mothers suggest that you sit your baby with you as you eat and let them take part in the meal. It's enjoyment rather than calories, a social time. The video research by Gill Rapley has shown that given food at 4 months, a baby will just play with it, at 5 months they'll pick it up and put it to their mouth then spit, at 6 months they'll eat it. Let them go their own pace. What's the hurry?



I don't think that I can let my baby wait until about 6 months

If you are concerned that your breastmilk alone is not enough for your baby, then why not visit one of the GBSN groups and talk it over? WHO suggest that you introduce formula milk alongside your normal breastfeeds until about 6 months when you can introduce family foods rather than introduce solids early.

But I've already started my baby on baby rice and he's not yet 6 months old

Many mothers feel a pressure to start their baby on purees much earlier than WHO recommend. Your options are:

- To continue with what you've planned and increase the quantities
- To continue with what you've started and hold it at that level
- To stop and build up the breastfeeding again

Don't babies choke?

Choking is a protective mechanism for babies. If they control the food themselves they are less likely to choke. However a minority of babies can be prone to choking so just stay close.

Mothers of babies who are prone to choking suggest:

“It's so imperative that the baby has control and that they're sitting upright. Gagging is a normal protective mechanism and works very well - it looks more alarming than choking actually. The gag reflex point on a baby's tongue is further forward than an adult's for the very reason that they need to be more protected than an adult. It's worth re-iterating that the chance to play with lots of different types of food gets them safer and safer as they learn about moving it around in their mouths with their tongues. Get a highchair that you can get your baby out of quickly – if your baby gags, then pick them up and lean them forwards so gravity can help get the food out. Pat them on the back if necessary. If they choke, they can't make a noise and will just flail around - it's no more likely with finger foods than with mush but it's a huge worry for parents. I would suggest that if they are worried that they go on a first aid course for babies and children.”



How do I go about baby-led introduction of family foods?

Many mothers describe lots of mess and crumbs so you might start with a covering on the floor. It can be easier to sit your baby on the floor rather than at the table. Don't leave your baby alone.

So how do I start?

Clare (mother of 3 baby-led weaning babies) says **“I'm not going to comment on the different foods and how and when to introduce them - it's made out to be much more complicated than it needs, in my opinion, so it's probably best if I don't comment at all!”**

Family food without added salt is the simplest way of doing things. Babies don't need much in the way of special food so as long as family food isn't processed ready-meals, then they can just eat what everyone else is eating. Our youngest, for instance, has never had anything special cooked for her, neither had my second child. We are used to cooking without salt and adding it to our plates afterwards now. Some parents add dried herbs for flavour instead of salt.”

So do I need to get baby rice and puree everything?

No! Purees were invented to get food past the immature baby's tongue thrust reflex. There is no research to suggest that baby's first solids needs to be bland. Indeed your breastmilk tastes different with every breastfeed.

Claire says “I know I've not got enough children to make up a scientific study, but mine have all enjoyed strong tasting foods straight away. In fact what they've enjoyed most is what their daddy and myself (for the eldest) and their older siblings (for the two younger ones) have been eating at the same time - they know when they're being short-changed and aren't happy about it!



Claire explains how she started with Tom: “I found Tom was far more receptive to being allowed to feed himself with his steamed carrot stick/ broccoli etc than if I tried to feed him carrot puree from a spoon. He seemed to get much more enjoyment out of mealtimes and it helped his fine motor skills and meant as he was " self feeding " that I actually got to eat my meal while it was still hot. I gave him the usual vegetables we were having steamed and cut into stick lengths, as at first he could only eat the portion sticking out of the top or bottom of his fist and not the bit in the middle. At first when he would gag something back up. It sounds and looks a bit scary as you think he was choking, but each time he would just gag and cough it back up and carry on unperturbed. “

And moving on...?

“I gave Tom toast fingers, melon slices, whole apple, peach slices which was like watching him chase a goldfish round his tray, strips of chicken, and just generally exactly the same as we were eating often just as it was e.g shepherds pie- which he just took fistfuls of and crammed in, or pasta- twists or quills were easiest and I just let him get on with it. He enjoyed the taste and the tactile experience of playing with food.”

Some suggestions from mothers who been there, done that...

- Everyone says to give babies cheese, but that has a high salt content so don't give them too much of that.
- Dried apricots are fab for iron, but also give babies the runs - I've found that more than one a day for under ones can cause tummy upsets.
- If you're having boiled eggs and soldiers, cook the baby's egg hard boiled for them to eat by hand.
- The sooner you let a baby run amok with their own spoon when giving them yoghurt etc., the quicker they learn to eat it neatly - you just have to grit your teeth about the mess at first!
- Same with drinking from a cup. Get them learning about drinking from a cup in the bath or just before changing them for bed so it doesn't matter if/when they get wet.
- Mine have all loved pasta and the joy they get out of playing with mashed potato is infectious!
- Snacks can be fruit or veg.
- Cut raw carrots thick for teething or otherwise boil/steam them so they're soft - carrots break off very hard when they're raw and I've always worried about the choking hazard.

And how much do they take?

Claire says “My experience of baby-led weaning with 6 month old babies (and not just my own) is that they don't actually ingest much for quite a few weeks, or even a couple of months. I've found that this is usually because they want much more control at this stage and want mostly finger food. None of mine would have anything off a spoon except for yoghurt and I've heard similar from other parents - even ones not intentionally doing “baby-led weaning”! But when they get the hang of feeding themselves, they suddenly take off. In my experience this sudden increase in ingesting solid foods can happen from about 8 months

up to 12 or even 13 months. Of course these have all been breastfed babies but it's worth noting as I know a lot of parents get very worried when their baby doesn't want to eat much at first and it can reinforce their belief that they should have started before 6 months.”

Claire adds “I think most parents worry is the fact that to start with they don't actually appear to eat very much but I found some information on the amount of calories that babies are able to get from breastmilk at 12 months reassuring (see earlier section) and it might be worth reminding parents that its more about first tastes and they don't have to be having three two course meals a day at six months.”

Some parents have been told “if you're baby's not eating much, then don't breastfeed him before meals”. **However it's important to continue to breastfeed “on demand” so your baby is definitely getting the nutrition he needs while he's taking his time to learn about how to eat and how to enjoy eating.**

It's important not to force your baby to eat more than they need – there is a suspicion that overfilling babies is one of the root causes of childhood obesity in that they stop learning when they don't need to keep eating.

Each GBSN group holds information sheets about introducing family foods to your baby. Also you can talk to peer supporters about your breastfeeding journey.

Have fun!