Starting Foods: The Baby-Led Weaning (BLW) Way

By about 6 months of age, babies can sit with support, hold their head and neck steady, open their mouth, and reach out to show they want food, and swallow, rather than push food back out with their tongue. When your baby can do these things, it's time for solid foods. There is no need to rush; starting solid foods earlier does not help babies sleep all night.

Baby-led weaning is a method of starting solids where babies feed themselves from the beginning. The food is placed in front of the baby and they use their hands or a spoon or fork to explore, pick up and bring the food to their mouth. This allows babies to learn how to chew and swallow at their own pace. You could also use both baby-led weaning and feed your baby purees with a spoon.

Baby-Led Weaning

- With baby-led weaning, food is offered in sizes and shapes that your baby can pick up based on their development.
- Begin with soft foods that can be easily mashed between your fingers. (i.e. cooked pasta or sweet potato, avocado, steamed carrot, etc.)
- Between 6 and 9 months, offer soft foods in long strips, about 3 inches long. This shape will be easier for your baby to pick up with their whole hand (palmar grasp). Or, you can offer a preloaded spoon by putting a small amount of pureed food on an infant spoon, setting it in front of your baby and letting them pick it up and bring it to their mouth.
- Between 8 and 12 months, your baby will start to use their thumb and finger (pincer grasp) to pick up small soft pieces of food. At this age, you can offer smaller pieces of soft food, about the size of a small blueberry.



Drinking From an Open Cup

- Between 6 and 7 months of age, your baby can learn to hold a cup. Start by letting your baby play with an empty cup with no lid.
- Hold the open cup for your baby and let them learn to take small sips of water, expressed breast milk or formula. Infants under 12 months of age should not drink any other beverages, such as milk, soy beverage, or juice, unless recommended by your healthcare provider.
- Expect some spills while your baby learns. Offer lots of practice and praise.
- Offering sippy cups that won't spill doesn't teach your baby how to sip and can increase the risk of tooth decay. If you want to use a sippy cup, use it only for a short time and only at meals.
- Cups with straws often have a lid and are also an option. Learning to drink from an open cup and a cup with a straw are skills your baby will always use.

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Starting Foods Safely

When your baby is eating, make sure they are upright (not leaning back). A footrest under your baby's feet is helpful for more stability and balance. Secure your baby in a seat or highchair with the family at mealtimes once or twice a day to start. Do not leave your baby alone when they are eating.

Gagging vs. Choking

- Gagging is a common and normal reflex when babies are learning to mash and chew food—it helps protect them from choking. While it can sound alarming, gagging is simply your baby's way of pushing food away from the airway if it's too big or if they aren't ready to swallow it. In most cases, your baby won't need help. Stay calm, and allow them to work through it.
- Choking is not normal: It is a silent, serious event when a larger piece of food gets stuck in the airway. If a baby's airway is blocked, they will be distressed, make very little or no noise, and may turn blue – they will need immediate help.
- To prevent choking, make sure your baby is upright when feeding, and never put pieces of food into your baby's mouth (let them feed themself).
- Avoid giving foods that may cause choking, such as small pieces of hard, raw vegetables or fruits; dry or tough chunks of meat; whole nuts and seeds; round pieces of food like hot dogs, popcorn, and grapes; and sticky or gooey foods like candies, fruit snacks and marshmallows.

Don't give honey or foods made with honey (including honey graham crackers) to infants under age one. Honey can make babies very sick. Never feed infants undercooked or raw animal foods like meat, poultry, fish, eggs and milk.

Talk with your baby's healthcare provider about safely starting solids if your baby was born prematurely, has severe eczema, a known food allergy or issues swallowing, or if you have any other concerns.

Starting Foods

- Research does not support introducing foods in any certain order; however, zinc and iron are important nutrients around 6 months of age because babies start needing more for growth and development. Offer foods that are high in iron and zinc, like tender, shredded meats and poultry; moist, tender ground meats, soft-cooked beans, or put infant cereal or pureed meats on a spoon and give it to them to feed themselves.
- Start by offering single-ingredient foods first and allow at least one day between foods to observe for possible allergic reactions such as rash, vomiting, diarrhea, or difficulty breathing.
- It is recommended to start foods such as peanut and nut products, eggs, yogurt/cheese/foods made with milk, wheat, sesame, soy, fish, and shellfish around six months of age to decrease the risk of developing a food allergy. Once introduced, it's important to continue offering it 2 to 3 times a week. Thin out peanut and nut butters and tahini (sesame) with fruit or vegetable purees, infant cereals, breast milk or formula to avoid choking.
- Try new foods many times. Some babies need to be offered a food 15 to 20 times before they accept it!
- Healthy infants do not need extra water in the first six months of life. Breast milk or formula is your baby's main source of nutrition and hydration during the first year. After 6 months of age and the introduction of solid foods, babies can start getting used to the taste of small amounts of plain water. Using fluoridated drinking water (tap water or bottled water with fluoride added) or checking with your baby's healthcare provider about a fluoride supplement is recommended to help prevent future tooth decay.

For More Information

Talk to your local WIC agency staff.
For contact information, call 800-532-1579, or visit https://hhs.iowa.gov/wic or www.signupwic.com.

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