



Nurses have a role to play in helping parents' decide what food a baby should be given and how, writes *Genevieve Becker*

Moving from milk to solids

It can seem like the baby is hardly settled with breastfeeding or formula, when the next question parents ask is when do they start giving other foods.

Foods other than milk are often added much earlier to the infant's diet than needed. Early solids can cause problems including increased risk of allergies, wheezing, later obesity, and can displace essential nutrients supplied by breast milk.¹

For many years, the recommendation has been to add foods between four and six months. Recently, the recommendation has changed focus from the four

months, to recommend adding complementary foods at six months of age.² Some parents may choose to add small quantities of other foods earlier than six months, however it is not essential. Solids should not be started before four months of age.

Readiness for foods other than milk is a developmental stage. The nurse can assist parents to recognise signs that the infant is ready, such as the infant's ability to:

- Sit upright without support
- Pick up a piece of food and get the food to their mouth
- Control their tongue better to move food around the mouth.

Signs such as waking more at night or being unsettled are not good indicators of readiness to start solids as these could mean many things.

Poor weight gain is often used as a reason for starting solids early. However, in the early months nurses should provide assistance with breastfeeding or formula feeding rather than the mother adding other foods. Ensure an accurate, up-to-date weight chart is being used.³

What to give

The term 'complementary foods' is used to emphasise that breast milk or formula is the main food for infants in their first year – the other foods complement rather than displace the milk.

Generally, it is best to aim towards using family foods for the baby. This can be a good time to help parents adjust to a healthy diet themselves if needed.

Babies over six months can eat most foods with spices, salt or sugar added after the baby's portion is taken out.

Commercial baby foods are not an essential stage, though they may be convenient for some families. Their overuse can result in an infant with limited tastes and experience of consistency.

Initially, the infant is learning about taste and consistency of foods so start with one to two spoonfuls. The parent should offer more as the baby shows interest.

Purèed/sieved fruits, vegetables, potatoes, rice, and purèed meat, fish, chicken or beans/pulses, can be used. Introduce foods one at a time so you can see if there is a reaction to the food. The aim is to give a variety of foods.

Flavoured fromage frais can be very high in sugar and fat. If used, it should be given as a treat rather than as a regular food and low sugar versions should be chosen.

If the infant is six months when solids are added, they move very quickly to mashed foods and foods they can pick up by themselves and then to chopped foods.

Foods containing iron such as meat, chicken, fish, well-cooked eggs, beans/pulses and dark green vegetables are important. Giving a vitamin C rich food such as fresh vegetables, tomato, fruit or juice, or a squeeze of lemon on food helps to absorb the iron from eggs, beans and other iron-containing foods.

Tea and coffee can reduce the absorption of iron and should not be

given to children.

Be careful about:

- Foods containing gluten – wheat, oats, rye, barley, and pasta, flour or bread made from these grains, should be avoided until six months of age
- In families with a history of allergies, avoid potentially allergenic foods such as nuts, eggs, cow's milk, and shellfish until the infant is older
- Food hygiene is very important – use clean hands and clean utensils, use fresh rather than leftover food where possible, and reheat any leftovers until very hot, stirring well (then allow to cool to a feeding temperature)
- Breast milk or infant formula can continue to be used into the second year. There is no need to change to follow-on milk. Cow's milk can be used in small amounts to mix foods after six months but not as a main drink under 12 months
- All water, including bottled and filtered water, should be boiled for infants until at least six months. Bottled water should have a sodium (Na) content less than 20mg per litre
- Pure fruit juice needs to be diluted one measure of juice to four to five measures of water to protect the baby's teeth. Special baby juices and herbal drinks are not needed, but if given should be used sparingly, and only at mealtimes from a feeding cup.⁴

Table 1

Weaning

When to offer foods other than milk

– Six months of age

What to offer

– A variety of foods

How to feed

– Responsive feeding

How to feed

How a baby is fed is as important as what the baby is fed. A baby needs to learn how to eat, to try new tastes and textures, to learn to chew, move food around the mouth and to swallow food.

Babies need to learn how to get food effectively into their mouths, how to use a spoon and how to drink from a cup.

Therefore, it is important to discuss with families how to feed as well as what to feed. Encourage families to:

- Help the baby learn to eat calmly, with smiles and patience
- Feed in response to baby's cues or signs and stop feeding when the baby shows they have had enough
- Offer finger foods so the baby can self-feed
- Stay with the baby through the meal

and be attentive.

Infants are not able to wait for mealtimes. Encourage families to have some healthy snack foods such as fruit, bread and cheese, easily available rather than relying on biscuits for snacks.

Offer food when baby seeks it rather than only at set mealtimes. At one year of age, the baby will be eating about five times a day plus breastfeeds or formula.

If the infant was very premature, did not gain weight well, has a family history of allergies or has other health or developmental concerns, the addition of foods other than milk should be discussed on an individual basis with a dietitian and doctor.

Aim to listen to the parents' ideas about feeding, praise ideas you want to encourage, give small amounts of relevant information and discuss ways families might use the suggestions. Assist families to observe and respond to their individual child's development.

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References

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2. WHO, *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Nutrition*, endorsed by Dept of Health and Children, May 2002
3. Charts such as *Breast from Birth and UK90 growth charts* developed by Child Growth Foundation, UK
4. Irish Dental Health Foundation www.dentalhealth.ie