

Chapter 1

Feeding Your Baby: From 4 to 6 Months

In This Chapter

- Determining when your child's ready for solid foods
- Feeding equipment every family needs
- Detailing the first meal
- Developing the brain and eyesight through nutrition

Baby, it's time to eat! By any measure, adding solid foods is an exciting nutritional and developmental milestone—for babies, their parents, and other caregivers, including sitters and relatives.

Ironically, although junior's initial spoonful of food is a major event worthy of recording, his first few weeks of solids are more about becoming accustomed to spoon-feeding than they are about good nutrition. Even so, there are guidelines for what to feed when the time is right.

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Why You Must Wait to Serve Solid Foods

Four months is the earliest age for safely starting solid foods in most children, according to The American Academy of Pediatrics. Yet, you've probably heard of others



Safe at the Plate

Unless directed to by your pediatrician, reserve baby bottles for infant formula or breast milk. There's no validity to the claim that adding cereal to a baby's bottle promotes sleeping through the night. In fact, the practice can lead to choking and overfeeding, and undermines the development of eating skills.

who didn't wait that long. Perhaps your neighbor fed her daughter infant cereal at two months without any obvious repercussions. Or maybe your mother has hinted over and over that she "fed you kids at three months and you all turned out fine."

Based on these and other testimonials, you might be tempted to try solids before your child is developmentally ready. Resist that urge. Until at least four months, your child's digestive tract is unable to break down and absorb foods more complex than breast milk or infant formula. Feeding solids too early sets the stage for allergic reactions and other feeding problems.

Ready to Eat, Baby?

Age is only one of the criteria for judging your child's readiness for solids. There are several other signs to look for, including the following:

- She holds her head up. Your child should be able to hold her head up with good control for short periods of time. The ability to voluntarily move her head allows a baby to lean toward food and away when she's not interested, helping you to avoid overfeeding her. Developed head and neck muscles also prevent choking.



Technically Speaking

The **extrusion reflex** is a baby's instinctive way of rejecting something that could choke her. It's an automatic response in younger infants to anything other than liquid in their mouth.

- She accepts food. The first few times your baby encounters a spoonful of food, she'll probably spit it right back at you. That reaction is normal, but it shouldn't last if she's really ready to eat. Baby's urge to eject an object from her mouth is called the *extrusion reflex*. If she continues to reject the spoon and its contents for a few meals running, hold off for a few days and then try again.

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- She's eyeballing your meal. Your baby might lean toward your food and try to grab it. She may even open her mouth when food passes in front of her or is close to her.
- She seems hungrier. Crying between feedings that had been holding her could mean she needs more food. If she's drinking upward of 35 ounces a day of infant formula and wants more or is nursing 8 to 10 times daily, she's probably ready for solids.

Nursing and bottle feeding are relatively straightforward feeding techniques that involve very little equipment; once baby is ready for solid foods, you'll need to make some additions.

Get the Gear: Must-Have Feeding Equipment

Starting solids requires an investment in certain low-tech gear. Here's what you need when your baby is ready to move on to more than fluids: highchair, bowls, spoons, towels, and bibs.

You can certainly start off feeding your child solid foods while he's sitting on your lap, but you might not want to make a habit of it. Why? He may balk when you decide it's time for him to eat in the highchair. To get baby interested in the highchair, let him sit in it for a few minutes at a time before his first meal is served there.

Highchairs can be hard to figure out. You, and anyone else who feeds your baby, should feel comfortable using the highchair. It pays to know how to secure your child in the highchair, and how to get him out quickly, if need be. The safest highchairs have a waist strap and a strap that runs between the legs. Whenever your child is in the highchair, use both straps to keep him secure and to prevent him from standing. Prevent slipping by padding the highchair with a towel or small blanket. Don't stray too far from the highchair; crafty older babies and toddlers may learn how to unfasten safety straps. The majority of highchair injuries occur when adults don't use the restraining straps and when children are not closely supervised.

Several small, sturdy plastic bowls are convenient for mixing and serving infant foods. And have a few spoons on hand that are specially designed for baby feeding. Small, shallow spoons with no hard edges work well; spoons coated with plastic are more comfortable for teething babies when they bite down to soothe their irritated gums. Spoons with long handles may be more comfortable for you to use because you don't have to lean in so far over the highchair tray to get the food to baby's mouth. Spoons with shorter, curved handles are ideal for baby to hold because they are difficult to

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poke themselves in the eye with. Curved handles are even handier later on when your child takes over the job of feeding himself because they are easy for little mitts to hold.

Small towels (face-cloth size) or paper towels work well for cleanup. Wipe the cleanest thing first—usually baby's face and hands—then clean the highchair and other surfaces covered with food.

Bibs with Velcro or snaps are easier to put on a squirming infant. Some babies are not messy eaters, so you may not need bibs. Other babies might need a bib, but are so distracted by it during the meal that it's just easier to go without. In the warm weather, you can feed a topless baby—it makes for a much easier cleanup!



Details, Please

A safe and sturdy highchair can take you from his first bite all the way through the toddler years. When purchasing a new highchair, choose one with a wide base for stability. Be sure that the waist belt has a buckle that cannot be fastened unless the crotch strap is also used, and look for easy-to-use straps. What about hand-me-down highchairs? They should be clean and sturdy. Be sure the straps are in good condition, are securely attached, and work properly.

The First Meal

Today's the day. You've assembled the necessary feeding gear and the video camera is charged. You've even invited the grandparents to view your child's foray into solid foods. What should you serve, and how should you go about it? Read on.

Timing Is Everything

Plan on introducing your child to solids when he's well rested and not overly hungry—this will make it easier for him to accept this new experience. A couple of hours after his first bottle and before his first nap of the day may be the ideal time for the first bite. Avoid introducing a ravenous child to spoon-feeding. You'll frustrate yourself and confuse him, because he's accustomed to eating from a bottle or the breast.

On the Menu

Today's special is: soupy iron-fortified rice cereal! For first-time eaters, this is the perfect choice for tickling their taste buds. It might not be your idea of a delectable meal, but rice cereal is the best food for babies just starting out. Why? Because it is free of

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gluten, a component of grains that can be allergenic, and it is fortified with iron. (Read more about the importance of iron in Chapter 11.)

No culinary talent is required to execute the recipe for the first of baby's many meals. In a very small bowl, combine the following:

- 1 teaspoon iron-fortified infant rice cereal
- 4 to 5 teaspoons expressed breast milk or infant formula

Mixture will be soupy. As for the temperature of baby's food, keep it cool to lukewarm. Your child's mouth is far more delicate than yours, and much more sensitive to burns.

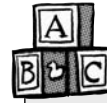
You've probably noticed by now that baby's food is not actually solid. Semi-solid or semi-liquid more aptly conveys the best texture for a four- to six-month-old, or any beginning eater. That's because runny cereal resembles breast milk and infant formula so it's more likely baby will readily accept it. It also reduces choking risk. Around six or seven months, when children typically become more experienced eaters, they can make the transition to a thicker cereal/fluid mixture. Premature babies might take longer to tolerate thicker cereal.

Most likely, your child will tolerate rice cereal without a problem. After a week or so, feel free, but not obligated, to move on to other single-grain fortified infant cereals, including oatmeal. Children of parents who have allergies should hold off on gluten-containing grains, however. See Chapter 14 for more on food allergies.

Bon Appétit, Baby!

The moment has arrived. She's in her high-chair, with bib securely fastened. You've mixed the infant cereal according to instructions and you're prepared with the proper infant feeding spoon. What now?

Face your baby and talk to her. Wait for her to look at you, but avoid putting on a show to get her attention (the start of a hard habit to break). After she's ready, place the spoon on her lips and try to gently slip it into her mouth. Because the cereal mixture will be runny, she



Technically Speaking

Gluten is the protein portion of some grains, including wheat, barley, oats, and rye, that can sometimes trigger an allergic reaction in susceptible babies. Gluten intolerance can show up at any age, but may first appear during infancy.



Safe at the Plate

Always pitch infant cereal and the contents of baby bottles (breast milk and formula) that your baby does not finish. Bacteria from baby's mouth makes its way into the food where it multiplies, even when refrigerated. Refeeding contaminated foods can give baby an upset tummy. Serve smaller portions if you're concerned about wasting food.

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may suck it right off the spoon. Or, she might spit it out—a natural reaction to a strange sensation. Try again, but only if she seems interested.

She'll probably take a few teaspoons of food at her first meal, or less. If she's more interested in touching her food than eating, don't worry. Touching is part of how babies experience the world. Repeat the process tomorrow at about the same time, feeding your baby in the same area of the house. Babies are creatures of habit, and they take comfort in ritual and routine.

Sorry, I'm Just Not into Solids

Maybe baby's first bites weren't the memorable moments you expected. In fact, it was a total washout. You tried to feed her a few teaspoons of cereal for what seemed like an eternity, but she wanted nothing to do with the highchair, the spoon, or the food on it.

Not to worry. Starting solids is unfamiliar territory for infants. So is understanding that she should keep food in her mouth, work it toward the back of her throat, and then swallow it. Look at it this way: first meals whet a baby's appetite for bigger meals later on.

It never pays to force the issue with an unwilling baby; it makes her tense and more likely to refuse food the next time around. You might win the battle (manage to stuff a few teaspoons full of food into his mouth), but you won't win the war (establishing healthy eating habits).

Try feeding your reluctant eater again in a few days. Some children just need lots of time to develop eating patterns that feel familiar and comforting to them. It could take weeks of gentle prodding before eating solids becomes second nature for your child. As long as your baby is consuming solids by six months, there's really no reason for concern.



Mother's Helper

Your child may not be interested in solids at four months, but it pays to keep trying every few days or so for health reasons. A recent *Journal of the American Medical Association* study suggests children who start on infant cereal between four and six months run a lower risk of developing type 1 diabetes later on. Although no one knows for sure what causes it, the study results reinforce the notion of introducing solid foods between four and six months.

How Much Formula or Breast Milk Your Baby Needs Now

Your child may start solid foods at four, five, or six months old. No matter when he begins, breast milk and infant formula will continue to provide the bulk of his nutritional needs for months to come.

For a while, solid food is just a supplement to baby's liquid nutrition. The likes of infant cereal and other grain products, fruits, vegetables, and meats slowly take over for breast milk and infant formula. By about a year, solids should dominate your child's diet (consult their pediatrician if fluids dominate your child's diet). Don't worry that your child isn't eating heaps of solid foods yet. Use the time to expose him to an array of cereals, meats, fruits, and vegetables.

There is no reason to alter how you prepare infant formula because you have added solid foods to your child's diet. Always adhere to the directions for formula use given on the product's label, unless your doctor tells you otherwise. Changing the concentration of infant formula can overwork a child's kidneys or it could mean he fails to get the nutrients he needs to grow properly.

If you're still nursing after solid foods are introduced, be sure to eat right. Nursing moms need extra calories found in highly nutritious foods; adequate rest; and enough fluids to produce the most nourishing breast milk.

Breastfeeding women aren't the only ones who should pay attention to good nutrition. All women in their childbearing years who are capable of becoming pregnant should pop a daily multivitamin containing 100 percent of the Daily Value (DV) for folic acid to help prevent birth defects should a pregnancy occur. A daily multivitamin is a good idea for filling other nutrient gaps, including iron.



Nutrition Nugget

If you've headed back to work, or just need a break from nursing, you probably bank breast milk for baby for when you're not around. Recent research suggests that the longer you freeze or refrigerate breast milk, the lower the levels of antioxidants drop (components that ward off cell damage). Don't fret, however, even stored expressed breast milk beats out several infant formulas for antioxidant content in the study. Bottom line: you can store breast milk for up to two days in the refrigerator and upward of six months in the rear of a freezer, but the fresher the breast milk, the better for baby.

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Breastfed Babies Need Extra Vitamin D

A shortfall of vitamin D in infants sets them up for rickets, a bone-softening disease. Babies drinking enough infant formula will likely get the vitamin D they need, but breastfed children may come up short.

Ask your pediatrician about over-the-counter vitamin D supplements. If you're nursing exclusively, your doctor will probably agree with The American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation that nursing babies consume 200 International Units of supplemental vitamin D every day beginning within the first two months of life. Babies fed a mixture of breast milk and infant formula may not need supplemental vitamin D, so explain in detail to your doctor what your child is drinking.

Handling the Voices of Experience

When you were pregnant, friends, strangers, and relatives came out of the woodwork to provide commentary about pregnancy, delivery, life after baby, and a host of other topics related to parenthood. It probably won't stop there. People will have plenty to say about feeding your infant, especially if your tactics are not commonplace, such as breastfeeding past one year or making your own baby food.

Here's how to avoid letting well-meaning people get the best of you:

- Don't second-guess solid advice from experts. As long as you abide by current feeding guidelines recommended by health experts, there's no need to think you're in the wrong.
- Don't talk too much. Discussing every little detail with anyone who will listen leaves you wide open to criticism.
- Be gentle but firm. Let them know that your methods are working well for your child.
- Let them talk, and smile politely. Don't let what they say get under your skin. Most people love the sound of their own voice.

If others cause you to doubt yourself, call your pediatrician with any questions.

Nurturing Your Baby's Brain Development and Eyesight

Your infant's brain is developing at lightning speed. During the first two years of life, neurons (the nerve cells in the brain) responsible for communicating feelings; storing

and retrieving memories; and processing information from the outside world, reach out to each other to form a sprawling communications network. At the same time, your infant's body is also busy securing speedy communication by laying down *myelin* around nerve cells.

Children require a balanced diet for peak brain function and vision. Although no single nutrient trumps another in importance, docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) is a type of fat that's particularly vital to proper development and function of the brain, nervous system, and vision. Nursing moms provide their babies with preformed DHA (the kind best used by the body) through breast milk; DHA-rich foods, including tuna, salmon, trout, sardines, and halibut, boost milk DHA levels. Pregnant and nursing women who avoid fish can get DHA in a supplement called Expecta LIPIL.

Bottle-fed babies reap the benefits of DHA from infant formula, also a good choice for breastfed babies making the switch to formula. Studies show formulas with DHA help maintain DHA levels in baby's body after weaning from the breast. Call infant formula makers to find out how much DHA is in their formula. Read more about DHA and brain development in Chapter 9.



Technically Speaking

Myelin is the sheath surrounding nerve cells that serves to protect them while preventing "short circuits" in communication.

The Least You Need to Know

- You must wait until at least four months to begin solid foods, but should start baby on solids by six months of age.
- At this stage, infant formula and breast milk supply the lion's share of baby's nutrient needs.
- It takes time for children and their parents to adjust to spoon-feeding. When a child doesn't seem ready, wait a few days and try again. Persistence pays off.
- Age is just one way to judge a child's readiness for solid foods; being capable of holding up her head is another. If your child shows an interest in food and is willing to open her mouth when you feed her, and if she seems hungrier, she's probably ready for more than fluids.
- During pregnancy, lactation, and the first two years of life, your baby's brain development and vision depend on a healthy diet. Docosahexaenoic acid is a fat that promotes peak brain development and eyesight.

