

Is my baby ready for solids?

What do the experts say?

Health experts and breastfeeding experts agree that it's best to wait until your baby is around six months old before offering solid foods. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization recommend that babies be exclusively breastfed (no cereal, juice or other foods) for the first 6 months of life. Some doctors may recommend delaying solids for the first year if there is a family history of allergies. See the handout *Why Delay Solids?* for more information on the benefits of delaying solids until 6 months or later.

Developmental signs that baby is ready for solids

Solids readiness depends on both the maturity of baby's digestive tract and baby's developmental readiness for solids. Although the maturity of baby's digestive system is not something that we can readily observe, research indicates that 6 months appears to be ideal for avoiding the allergies and other health risks of too-early solids. After this point, different babies are ready for solids at different times -- developmental readiness for solids cannot be determined using a calendar. Most babies are developmentally ready for solids somewhere between 6 and 8 months.

Signs that indicate baby is developmentally ready for solids include:

- Baby can sit up well *without* support.
- Baby has lost the tongue-thrust reflex and does not automatically push solids out of his mouth with his tongue.
- Baby is ready and willing to chew.
- Baby is developing a "pincer" grasp, where he picks up food or other objects between thumb and forefinger. Using the fingers and scraping the food into the palm of the hand (palmar grasp) does not substitute for pincer grasp development.
- Baby is eager to participate in mealtime and may try to grab food and put it in his mouth.

We often state that a sign of solids readiness is when baby exhibits a long-term increased demand to nurse (sometime around 6 months or later) that is unrelated to illness, teething pain, a change in routine or a growth spurt. However, it can be hard to judge whether baby's increased nursing is related to readiness for solids. Many (if not most) 6-month-old babies are teething, growth spurting and experiencing many developmental changes that can lead to increased nursing – sometimes all at once! Make sure you look at *all the signs of solids readiness as a whole*, because increased nursing alone is not likely to be an accurate guide to baby's readiness.

At what point does baby need nutrition from solids that cannot be provided by breastmilk alone?

Medical research tells us that exclusive breastfeeding allows babies to thrive for the first 6 months and often beyond. In the words of the World Health Organization,

"Breastfeeding is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants... A recent review of evidence has shown that, on a population basis, exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months is the optimal way of feeding infants."

Breastmilk should make up the majority of baby's nutrition through the end of the first year. At some point toward the end of the first year, most babies will gradually begin to need more iron and zinc than that provided by breastmilk alone - at that point, additional nutrients can be obtained from small amounts of solids.

Some babies thrive on breastmilk alone until 12 months or later - as long as your baby is continuing to gain weight and grow as he should, your milk is meeting his needs well.

What if my 4-5 month old seems developmentally ready for solids?

Four- to five-month-old babies are sometimes very eager to participate at mealtime, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are ready to eat solids - more often it's just the normal developmental urge to do what everyone else is doing. Research studies tell us that there are many health advantages to delaying solids for about 6 months for *all* babies, not just the babies who are not yet interested in mealtime.

There are a number of things you can do to let baby participate at mealtime *without* starting solids:

- Let baby sit with the family at mealtime - in a lap, booster seat or high chair.
- Give baby a cup of water or expressed milk. Your baby can entertain himself at mealtime while learning to use a cup. 1-3 ounces of water in the cup should be plenty (often for the entire day). Many moms choose to use only water or a small amount of breastmilk to avoid wasting the "liquid gold" while baby learns to use the cup.
- Offer baby sips of water from your cup or straw. Even if baby hasn't figured out how to use a straw yet, you can put your straw in water, block the top end of the straw with your finger to trap a little water in the straw, then let baby drink the water from the lower end of the straw (unblock the top end once it's in baby's mouth).
- Offer baby spoons, cups, bowls and other baby-safe eating utensils to play with during mealtime.
- Give baby an ice cube (if it's a baby-safe size & shape) or ice chips to play with.
- Offer baby a "momsicle" (popsicle made from breastmilk) or slushy frozen breastmilk to eat with a spoon.

For more information and references, see www.kellymom.com/nutrition/solids/

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