Weaning
your premature baby
Important note to readers
The information contained in this booklet should be used in consultation with your health visitor.

All babies are different and should be treated as individuals.

National guidelines on feeding infants during the first year are aimed at healthy term babies and acknowledge that premature babies require separate advice. For further information on the latest research on nutrition for premature babies or for any queries regarding weaning your premature baby, please email enquiries@bliss.org.uk or call the Family Support Helpline: FREEPHONE 0500 618140.

All ages quoted in this booklet are from the date your baby was born, however premature your baby was – this is your baby’s ‘chronological’ or ‘uncorrected’ age.

This booklet was produced for BLISS – the premature baby charity.

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Introduction

What is weaning?
By weaning, we mean the introduction of the first solid foods to a baby who has only ever had breast milk or baby milk formula as their nourishment.

Why wean?
Solids are important for the development of lip, tongue and jaw movements. New tastes and textures help encourage babies to eat a good range of foods later on, and ensure that the diet is nutritionally balanced. Babies will also reach a point when breast or formula milk no longer supplies all the nutrition they need to grow well.

When to start
We recommend that weaning starts when your baby is between five and seven months old (that is, uncorrected age from birth). You don’t have to wean as soon as five months is reached, but start to look for signs that your baby might be ready. It is better to delay a little rather than rush before your baby is ready. There are government guidelines recommending that for most babies weaning shouldn’t happen before six months old, but premature babies are not included in these guidelines. Very occasionally, a premature baby may benefit from weaning before five months, but this must always be done with the advice of the healthcare team.

Pointers to weaning
Below are some pointers that may help you decide when your baby is ready for weaning:

- Your baby is showing interest in other people eating.
- Your baby is putting things into his/her mouth.
- Your baby seems less satisfied with milk alone, and ready for something new.
It is important not to begin weaning too early or too late for the following reasons:

**If you wean too early**
Although giving premature babies milk early helps to develop their digestive system, it still may not be developed enough to take solids before five months. Also, at the beginning of weaning, babies may reduce the amount of breast milk or infant formula they take, in favour of solids. This may lead to poorer growth because of a poorer or lower intake of nutrients.

**If you wean too late**
Many babies start to make some early ‘chewing movements’* from around four months. They may also rely less on sucking and are able to use their tongue and lips to explore toys and food. It is important for the development of the mouth and jaw muscles that babies don’t start solids too long after these chewing movements start. Around five to seven months old, babies are usually willing to try new flavours but, as they grow older, this can become more difficult. If a baby is used to a spoon and semi-solids by seven months, the introduction of lumps should be easier. If weaning hasn’t happened by seven months, there may be a higher chance of feeding difficulties.

*If this happens much earlier, and your baby seems distressed, check these symptoms with your doctor. It may be milk or acid regurgitation (reflux).

**Preparing for meal times**

With a little preparation, mealtimes can be made fun!

- Don’t plan to offer solids when your baby is likely to be very hungry.
- If your baby does get too hungry and frustrated, give a little milk first and then try with solids.
- Some babies can become distracted when there is too much going on in the room while they are eating, for example, TV or radio. If so, try to have as few distractions as possible.
Make sure you and your baby are comfortable and dressed for a bit of mess – especially when your baby starts becoming more active at meal times, for example, holding their own spoon and playing with food. Playing with food is an important part of learning about it and how to eat it!

If possible, choose a place where you don’t mind mess on the floor or furniture. If your baby’s face gets messy, try not to wipe up until the end of the meal – especially if your baby doesn’t like having their face wiped.

**Baby’s positioning for weaning**

To avoid accidents, your baby should never be left unattended.

**To start**

- It is important for your baby to be in a good position to help him/her manage taking spoon feeds more easily.

- The line drawings below show a) the position to avoid and b) the position to aim for. Make sure that your baby can bring his/her hands together and that he/she is upright and well supported.

![Image of baby positions]


- Although it is okay to feed your baby in your arms to start with, it is better for his/her development if he/she is in a seat later.

- Use a detachable car seat or ‘bouncy’ chair placed on the floor and sit on the floor so you can make eye contact with your baby. This type of chair is useful until your baby has grown large enough to push against the bottom bar.
If your baby finds it difficult to hold his/her head up, use a soft small towel to help keep the head in line with the body.

If you are seeing a speech and language therapist or physiotherapist they will give you advice on the best way to support your baby during weaning.

Later on

- A high chair with a tray is good for feeding as it encourages your baby to sit upright and play with, then eat, his/her food.

- Make sure your baby can bring his/her hands together to touch food which is in front of them.

- To avoid your baby slumping when first sitting in a high chair, it may help to wrap a towel round his/her middle or use some other soft washable object.

- Be sure to take your baby out of the high chair if he/she becomes upset as they may be bored or uncomfortable.

Important points to remember

- Do not add solids to your baby's bottle. To develop feeding skills properly, it is important for your baby to learn to take food from a spoon.

- Avoid foods containing gluten until over six months of age, for example, those made with wheat, (ordinary rusks and Weetabix), bread and pasta, oats (in porridge and Ready Brek), barley and rye.

- Do not add salt to your baby's food or to the water it is cooked in. There is the right amount of salt already present naturally in foods.

- Do not give honey before one year as there is a small risk of tummy infection.

- Only add sugar to your baby's food in small amounts, for example, to sweeten sour foods such as cooking apples.
Do not add chilli to your baby’s food, but herbs, onion, garlic and spices are OK.

It is very important to give some home-cooked food to help avoid refusal of them later on.

Making meals variable in taste and, later, texture will help your child be more accepting of different foods, and also means that your baby gets a good balance of nutrients.

If you would like to give your baby a vegetarian or vegan diet, please discuss this with your health visitor.

It is probably best to delay giving foods commonly associated with allergy until after six months, for example, eggs, fish, nuts and seeds and citrus fruits. Remember that whole nuts should not be given to children until age five because of the risk of choking.

After six months, food allergy is only likely to be a problem if there is a strong history of allergy in your family. If you are worried about this, please talk to your health visitor. If your baby becomes constipated, ask your health visitor for advice.

First foods

Pure baby rice made with your baby’s usual milk is an ideal first food.

- Start with just one meal a day when you and your baby are not tired and your baby is not too hungry. This could be at any time you choose.

- First foods should be very smooth and runny and be able to drop off the spoon easily. Use a liquidiser or a sieve to get the right consistency.

- To start off with, mix one or two teaspoons of baby rice or gluten free rusk with your baby’s usual milk at each mealtime, and gradually build up the amount.
Contrary to popular belief, babies do not like bland flavours.

New flavours can be tried within the first week and different ones given every day or so.

Introduce some home prepared food, especially home prepared fruit and vegetables as often as you can. Shop-bought food can be used as well, but it is important to introduce the taste of real fruit and vegetables to your baby as early as possible if you want them to like eating these foods when they are older.

Within one or two weeks, you can start to offer two meals a day. Some babies can go faster, some slower.

During the first month or so of weaning, milk should continue to be your baby’s major source of nutrition. Try not to let solids replace milk until a little later. Use your baby’s usual milk to mix into solids instead of water.

Some ideas

Home-made foods
Vegetables and fruits can be low calorie if given alone, so use starchy higher calorie vegetables (potato, sweet potato, yam, cassava) to mix with lower calorie ones (cauliflower, carrot, broccoli).

Mix stewed soft fruit (apple, plum, apricot) with pure baby rice or rusk and your baby’s usual milk. Remove any fibres and skins. Ripe avocado and banana are very easy first foods for those occasions when you don’t have as much time for preparation.

Shop-bought foods
Use first stage meals: meat or fish dishes should contain at least 2.5g of protein per 100g, vegetable savouries should contain at least 2g of protein per 100g, and sweet meals at least 1g of protein per 100g (see page 9).