

First Foods for Preterm Babies



Aim to exclusively breastfeed your baby for the first few months; every extra month is beneficial. Continue to breastfeed for up to two years or longer. If your baby is not breastfed, infant formula is the only suitable alternative to breastmilk in the first year of birth.

When to start solids

- Too soon - less than 3 months after due date
- Just right - 3 to 4 months after due date
- Too late - more than 7-10 months after birth

The advice of "around 6 months" is not intended for babies born preterm. This information is for babies born at less than 32 weeks.

Clues your baby is ready for solids

Introducing first foods will be much easier if your baby:

- Can hold his or her head up well and sit
- Leans towards food when it is offered and opens his or her mouth
- Appears to be able to eat from a spoon
- Doesn't immediately push food out of his or her mouth, although for some preterm babies this may not be a useful indicator especially if other cues indicate the baby is ready. Other reliable cues are increasing demands for feeds and an appetite that is clearly not satisfied with milk alone



Baby's first food

- At first - give breastmilk or infant formula and then offer solids as a top up
- Puréed smooth and creamy, no lumps, lukewarm
- Use a small teaspoon and put the food in the middle of their tongue
- Try one teaspoon first and gradually increase as baby wants more
- If they do not enjoy it the first time, leave it for a few days and try again
- Remember - sometimes a baby will need to try a new food 10 times before they enjoy it
- Progress over the next few weeks to mashed/lumpy foods and soft finger foods
- Offer drinks from a cup sometimes - see drinks section over the page

Once you have started solids, offer your baby a variety of foods every day including:

- vegetables and fruit
- lean red meat, chicken, fish, seafood, eggs, nut butters
- legumes (such as lentils, tofu and beans)
- grain foods (such as iron fortified infant cereal, porridge, bread, rice, noodles and pasta)
- milk and milk products (such as yoghurt and cheese)
- common allergy causing foods

Some preterm babies benefit from starting with higher energy vegetables and fruits such as kumara, potato, avocado, puréed apples and ripe banana.

About 2 months after starting solids

- Offer solids before breast or formula feeding
- Offer drinks from a cup instead of a bottle more often (~9 - 10 months after birth)
- Introduce soft, cut up finely, minced or mashed and offer finger foods

Around this age, babies start to learn to chew. The texture of foods can change fairly quickly from smooth to mashed with small soft lumps, e.g. finely minced meat. Learning to chew with their gums or teeth is very important as it strengthens jaw muscles, promotes healthy teeth and ensures a smooth progression to family foods.

- Let your baby guide you about how much they eat
- Encourage them to eat, but don't force them
- Sit with your baby while they eat or drink, and include them in family mealtimes
- From a young age, encourage your child to feed themselves
- Even if food allergy runs in the family, we do not recommend avoiding any foods except on medical advice. There is some evidence that it is helpful to introduce as many different foods as possible while still breastfeeding
- When preparing food for your baby, do not add salt or sugar. If using commercially prepared foods, choose those that are low in salt (sodium) and no added sugars

Drinks

- Once they are eating solid foods, recommended drinks are breastmilk and water
- Cow's milk can be offered as a drink from 12 months of age
- Do not give your baby juice, cordial, fruit drink, flavoured milk, soft drinks, tea, or coffee
- For non-breastfed toddlers over 12 months of age, offer up to 350mL of cow's milk a day in a cup (not a bottle). Breastfed toddlers may need even less cows milk

Iron is very important for preterm babies

Preterm babies have lower iron stores at birth than term infants and a higher risk of iron deficiency. Iron plays an important role in immunity, brain development and growth. Babies who do not get enough iron will become tired, pale and uninterested in play. To improve blood iron levels babies need a variety of iron containing foods every day.

Best iron sources:

- Beef, mutton, lamb - mince to help with chewing
- Liver - cook, then grate or sieve and add to mashed vegetables
- Chicken, fish, sausage, liver paste, pate

Moderate iron sources:

- Iron - fortified breakfast cereals (check the label to see if iron is added)
- Eggs
- Dark green leafy vegetables (such as silver beet, spinach, puha, taro leaves)



If your baby has been prescribed iron and vitamin supplements, it is very important to keep giving these supplements until their first birthday.

References

- Ministry of Health. Healthy Eating Guidelines for New Zealand Babies and Toddlers (0–2 years old). Wellington, September 2021. Available at www.health.govt.nz.
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