

Typical Hunger and Fullness Signals in the First Two Years

A first step with applying responsive feeding practices is to recognize infant and toddler cues for hunger and fullness. Each baby has his or her own signs for hunger and fullness that progress from rooting for the breast or turning away in the early months of life to verbally asking for more or indicating “no” by shaking his or her head in late toddlerhood. It pays to learn these signs early on and each child is different. Caregivers may not always get it right, but as you pay close attention, chances are they will learn the signals and be on the mark most of the time.

| Age | Hunger Signals | Fullness Signals |
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| Birth-6 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wakes and tosses • Excited arm and leg movements • Roots for the breast • Fist to mouth • Opens mouth while feeding to indicate wanting more • Smiles, gazes at caregiver, or coos during feeding to indicate wanting more • Cries or fusses <p>NOTE: Crying is a late sign of hunger that may occur when the baby has displayed other cues that have been ignored. Finally, baby is frustrated and very hungry. Don't wait until baby cries!</p> <p>Also, crying is not always a sign of hunger, but of needing something to be different. Baby could be tired, want to be held, or need a diaper change. Observing baby's cues should help you understand her needs.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seals lips together • Turns head away • Decreases or stops sucking • Spits out the nipple or falls asleep when full • May be distracted or pay more attention to surroundings (4-6 mo.) |
| 6-9 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaches for spoon or food • Points to food • Gets excited when food is presented • Opens mouth or leans forward | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating slows down • Pushes food away • Clenches mouth shut |
| 9-12 months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expresses desire for specific food with words or sounds • Reaches for spoon or food • Points to food • Gets excited when food is presented • Opens mouth or leans forward | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shakes head to say, “no more” • Eating slows down • Pushes food away • Clenches mouth shut |
| 1-2 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines phrases with gestures such as “want that” and pointing • Can lead adult to refrigerator and point to a desired food or drink | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses words like “all done” and “get down” • Plays with food when full |

Adapted from: Healthy Eating Research. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (Issue Brief, May 2017). *Feeding Infants and Toddlers: Using the Latest Evidence in Child Care Settings.*