

Introducing Infants to Solid Foods

Experts agree that infants should be introduced to solid foods once the infant shows developmental signs of readiness. This typically happens around six months of age. From 6 months to around 24 months, a child will taste, explore and learn to eat a variety of foods and textures, as she transitions fully to table foods.

The introduction of foods in addition to breast milk or infant formula provides additional nutrients and energy, as well as the opportunity to develop self-feeding skills. Up until 12 months, the majority of a baby's energy needs are still filled by breast milk or formula. But exposure to a wide variety of healthy foods, and to a variety of textures--pureed, ground or soft, chopped table foods—is very important. What baby eats at this age will influence her taste and texture preferences as she grows.

Early childhood caregivers can play an important role in educating parents to observe their child's developmental eating cues. As always, advise parents to talk with their pediatrician first about their child's readiness for solid foods. Parents and early childhood caregivers can then discuss and determine together how to introduce solid foods in a coordinated way both at home and at childcare.

Key Developmental Milestones for Readiness

Around six months, and before solid foods are introduced, infants should be:

- Sitting without support and have good head and neck control
- Able to use the tongue to move soft food to the back of the mouth for swallowing
- Bringing hands and toys to the mouth for exploration (palmar grasp)
- Indicating a desire for food, e.g., eagerness to participate in family mealtimes and trying to grab food to put in her/his mouth

Infants also should **not** have extrusion reflex any longer (i.e., does not automatically push solids out of the mouth with her/his tongue).

Some infants are ready for solid foods earlier than 6 months of age. If an infant has ALL signs of readiness earlier than 6 months, ask the family if they have talked with their health care provider about introducing pureed foods.

Myth – Pureed foods should be introduced before soft, chopped table foods.

Fact – Introducing pureed foods first is a common practice in the United States but is not a MUST. In other cultures, infants eat ground up or mashed table food in tiny pieces. Be aware that this is safe as long as the food is soft and small, and that infant feeding preferences may differ among the families you serve.