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Starting Solids

Starting to feed your baby solid food is a much anticipated, fun, and exciting (albeit messy!) time. There is often a lot of confusion concerning the introduction of solids and what can be given when. The following is a general guide to starting solids, but remember, there are always special cases and exceptions. Much of this information is merely “stylistically” what I do as a Pediatrician. This represents what has worked best in MY experience over the past 10+ years. Aside from starting solids before 4 months, much of the following is done slightly differently by every doctor. So when someone tells you what “their doctor” said, if it differs from what I said, neither of us is more right or wrong. It is merely differing styles of doing things. This goes for a lot of topics in medicine, which is why medicine is called “an art.” Now let’s get out our cameras, put on our raincoats, grab the mop and let’s dig in!

We usually start solid foods when a baby is between 4-6 months. Exactly when in that period, depends on the individual situation. However, a baby should never be given any solids BEFORE 4 months old (unless specifically directed otherwise by a doctor – these situations are rare). This includes putting cereal in the baby’s bottle. Although there may be a lot of peer pressure to do so, it is NOT healthy for your baby. Feeding a baby solids too early will NOT make them sleep better. It does, however, increase the risk of obesity, allergies, and GI issues (as proven by several studies).

The first solid food we start with is baby cereal. This should be “Stage 1” single grain cereal, without anything else mixed in (ie, fruit). The typical cereals you will find (in any pharmacy or supermarket) are rice, oatmeal, and barley. You can start with any of these, but as a general rule going forward, only introduce one new food at a time every 2-3 days. For example, if you start with oatmeal cereal, give it for 2-3 days before moving on to, say, rice cereal. The reason for this is to make sure the baby doesn’t have any allergic reaction. Any allergic reaction will

NOT be subtle! If you think you see a small red spot develop on the baby's left foot, this is likely completely unrelated. A serious allergic reaction will involve a full body rash/hives, several bouts of severe/bloody diarrhea, or severe vomiting.

The baby should be fed from a bowl a baby spoon (plastic or rubber tipped). The food should NOT be placed in the baby's bottle. It is normal for a baby to spit out the food or refuse it at first, but keep trying... they will take it eventually! You should start with one feeding a day. The time of this feeding (morning, afternoon, evening, 2AM) is entirely up to you, however, it should not be when the baby is due for a bottle/nursing. About an hour prior to this time is ok. How much the baby eats in one sitting is up to them. They will let you know when they've had enough.

To begin with, you can make about three tablespoons worth of cereal. I recommend mixing it, at first, with formula or breast milk so the baby is more familiar with the taste. Once they get used to the taste, you can mix it with warm water. You do not need to measure exact amounts, you can either just follow the directions on the box or just "eyeball" it. You want the consistency to be that of a "slurry." If you turn over the spoon and the cereal sticks to it, it's too thick. If you pick up the spoon and it all runs off, it's too thin. Anywhere in between is fine.

Feed the baby cereal once a day for about two weeks. After two weeks, you can introduce vegetables. There is no hard scientific evidence for starting veggies before fruit, but it just makes sense that if we start with fruit, they won't want veggies! You can either buy the jars of vegetables (Stage 1, single vegetable, to start) or make them yourself. If you make them yourself, remember they do not stay for more than a few days in the refrigerator. It is ok to make a puree then freeze it. A lot of people like using an ice cube tray for this, so they can easily defrost one or two small portions at a time. At the time you introduce vegetables, you can also feed the baby solids twice a day. At this point you should feed at least one serving per day of cereal and at least one serving per day of veggies. At any given feeding, you can give cereal alone, veggies alone, or mix the cereal with the vegetable.

As a general rule, it is best to offer the baby a variety of foods (after the 2-3 day trial period). Babies' tastes are very fickle. They can refuse to eat something the first seven times it is offered to them, but somehow, they'll gobble it up the eighth time, then only want that food! Unfortunately, the opposite is true too: A food they love, they will one day, without warning, stop eating (usually right after you buy a large Costco sized case of it)!

The vegetables we usually start with include: carrots, sweet potatoes, butternut squash, peas, green beans, etc. Which ones go first does not really matter (despite what you might hear about starting "orange" or "greens" first). Feeding the veggies with introducing a new one every 2-3 days should be done for about an additional 2 weeks. After that, you can introduce

fruits. At that point, the baby should be eating at least one serving of cereal and at least one serving of a fruit or vegetable daily. This should usually take you up to six months.

At **six months**, if everything is going well as above, we go on to the next step. As far as fruits and vegetables go, if you are feeding jars, you can go to Stage 2 jars. Aside from the jar being bigger, the food itself has some slightly bigger pieces in it. If you are making your own food, this means making the food less than a puree, with some more consistency to it.

We also introduce meat at this age. Any meat (NOT including fish) is ok as long as you can get it small enough. Chicken, beef, turkey, veal, etc. are all ok. Boiled chicken (like from a chicken soup) can be mashed up with the back of a fork and mixed with vegetables if so desired. Ground meat like meatballs or meatloaf can be mashed with the back of a spoon and fed to the baby.

Other foods the baby can eat now include beans (overcooked and mashed up), soy, “pastina” (overcooked, not “al dente”) and some table food. You can feed the baby an avocado just by scraping some straight from the avocado (once it’s ripe enough). Same thing can be done with a banana. Mashed potatoes are ok too, assuming there are not too many additives (ie, dairy products like cream, cheese, butter, etc).

A word about juice... At six months, a baby can theoretically start drinking juice. However I would strongly discourage this. While it is true juices are “natural” they still contain a large amount of sugar. Yes, it is “natural sugar” but it still contains a lot of calories. Studies have shown that toddlers who drink juice are far more likely to be overweight than those who don’t. Rather, you should get your baby used to drinking water at this time. I recommend not giving the water in a baby bottle, but rather a straw cup or “sippy” cup. The straw cup is preferred, but a sippy cup is also acceptable. At this age, a baby IS able to learn to drink from a straw, which makes life much more convenient as it is usually easier to find a straw (which can be put in any cup) when you are out.

At approximately 7-8 months (say, 7½?) you can start feeding your baby solids three times a day. Around this same time we like to introduce “finger foods.” My preference is to start with Cheerios. That’s General Mills, yellow box, black writing, PLAIN Cheerios. The reason this makes a difference is due to the fact that a real plain Cheerio will dissolve in a baby’s mouth without chewing. It also has a hole in the middle making it very difficult to choke on. Finger foods should not be fed TO the baby, rather they should be placed in front of the baby and allow them to feed themselves. This is a very important exercise in fine motor development. At first the baby will try to grab it with a whole fist and maybe luckily get one in the mouth every few tries. The rest will end up down their shirt, in their diaper, or rolling across the

kitchen floor. This is OK! By the time the baby is around nine months, they should develop the “pincer grasp” allowing them to pick up one at a time.

Once the baby masters the Cheerios, you can give other finger foods such as fruit/veggie puffs, and toddler cookies/biscuits. By this time, the baby should be able to eat other small soft foods by themselves with their fingers.

At **nine months** the baby can start on dairy products and eggs. Dairy products include: yogurt, cheeses, cottage cheese, cream cheese, ICE CREAM & CHOCOLATE (yay!). You absolutely do NOT need to buy special baby yogurt. Any yogurt is fine (and less expensive!) as long as it doesn't have big chunks of food that the baby can potentially choke on. Plain yogurt, vanilla yogurt, Greek yogurt, whipped yogurt are all fine. The only dairy product to be avoided at this time is straight milk. The baby should still be drinking breast milk or formula until the age of 12 months. Eggs, as well as products made with eggs are ok to feed now too. Yes, this means the entire egg (white and yolk). Scrambled eggs, hard boiled eggs, soft boiled eggs, etc. are all ok except for raw eggs, of course. If there is no strong family history of allergies to these foods, recent studies suggest it is better to introduce fish and peanut products at this time.

Between 9-12 months, the baby should be transitioning from breastmilk/formula being the staple and solids the supplement, to the other way around. They can basically eat anything that is not a choking hazard except for: straight milk, and honey from the jar. For these items, we wait until one year old to feed the baby (with the exception of shellfish, fish and peanuts if there is a strong family history of allergy).

That is the gist of it. Remember, if you have any specific questions regarding YOUR child, please ask me. Every baby is different and there is no such thing as “one size fits all” when it comes to kids. The above are just some general guidelines.