

# Baby-Led Weaning

(6 MONTHS+)



**Baby-led weaning is a method of feeding babies solid foods that encourages babies to eat a wider variety of textures and types of foods earlier.** Rather than starting with only spoon-fed pureed foods, in baby-led weaning, caregivers are encouraged to also give foods that babies can hold and feed to themselves.

This method of feeding is different than the way we have introduced solid foods to babies traditionally in the United States but is similar to the way babies have been fed in Europe for many years.

There is a lot of research happening right now comparing the two methods of introducing solid foods (traditional baby food method vs. baby-led weaning) and right now we don't know for sure if one method is better than the other.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

There are pros and cons to baby-led weaning which you should consider and talk about with other caregivers for your child when deciding what method of feeding makes the most sense for your baby and your family.

Above all—when feeding your baby, keep safety in mind! No matter what method of feeding you choose, you want to avoid choking. Watch your baby closely as you introduce new foods and let your baby set the pace—let them take their time as they learn these new skills.

## PROS OF BABY-LED WEANING

- Helps babies regulate their own intake and appetite—letting your baby feed themselves rather than spoon feeding gives baby more control over what (and how much) they put in their mouths.

Some people think this method of feeding is less likely to lead to obesity because babies learn to stop eating when they are full. This is one of the things being researched right now.

- Self-feeding increases fine motor skills and dexterity and promotes sensory exploration.
- Baby becomes familiar with a wider variety of textures and flavors. Some supporters of baby-led weaning propose that this will lead to children that are more adventurous (less picky) eaters.
- Encourages family centered mealtime. When a baby is feeding themselves, caregivers are free to enjoy a meal with them or even share appropriate foods from their plate.

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## CONS OF BABY-LED WEANING

- Risk of choking—it is important to choose the right textures and types of foods for baby to feed themselves to avoid risks of choking. It is also important to watch baby closely, so they don't put too much food in their mouth at once. Even soft foods can be choked on if baby takes too much at once.
- Some babies may not take in enough nutrients—when baby is in control of intake rather than an adult it is harder to control how much of each food, they will take in. Some babies may miss key nutrients like iron or zinc if they are not eating iron fortified cereals or other iron rich foods.
- Baby-led weaning may not be appropriate for babies with developmental delays, poor growth, nutritional deficiencies, or other medical conditions. These infants may not be ready to go directly to thicker textured foods, or they may lack the dexterity in their hands to feed themselves.

## HOW TO

- Around 6 months of age provide foods that are approximately the size of an adult's finger—this size helps baby hold onto it. Food should be cooked to the point where baby can 'squash' it on the roof of their mouth using their tongue. Around 9 months of age you can start cutting foods into smaller bite sized pieces as your child develops a "pincer" grasp.
- Baby should always be seated while eating. Do not feed your baby while they are crawling around or playing.
- Baby should not be left unattended while eating—do not feed your baby in the car seat or stroller.
- Continue to breast feed or bottle feed—most nutrients come from breastmilk or formula for the 1st year of life.

- Remember that baby-led weaning, like so many other parenting approaches, isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. You can choose baby-led weaning some of the time, alternating with spoon feeding or adding to it (baby eats a chunk of banana, you spoon in some yogurt).

## SOME FOODS TO TRY

- ✓ Tender cooked finger-sized pieces of cooked vegetable, such as zucchini, sweet potato, carrots, parsnip, broccoli, or cauliflower.
- ✓ Sliced avocado, banana, mango or tender peach or pear.
- ✓ Toast with spreads such as nut butter, bean dip or hummus.
- ✓ Tender pieces of pasta, pancake, or waffle. (Note: it is OK to dip in yogurt to soften.)
- ✓ Cooked egg, tender smoked salmon, chickpea patties, cooked beans, and legumes.

## AVOID CHOKING HAZARDS

Foods that are too hard or too big can block your baby's windpipe so they cannot breathe. Cut and cook food to make it safer. **Do not give these foods to your baby:**

- ✗ Nuts
- ✗ Whole grapes, cherries, or cherry tomatoes
- ✗ Raw vegetables, uncooked apple slices, or uncooked dried fruit
- ✗ Thick gobs of nut butter
- ✗ Hot dogs
- ✗ Large chunks of meat or cheese
- ✗ Fish with bones
- ✗ Popcorn or other crunchy snacks like chips, pretzels, or granola bar
- ✗ Avoid use of extra salt, sugar, or artificial sweeteners

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