

Weaning infants onto solid foods

Summary:

- **Exclusive breastfeeding from birth until weaning is the optimal way to feed young infants**
- **Continuing breastfeeding throughout weaning may reduce the risk of coeliac disease and allergy**
- **Term infants should not begin weaning before 4 months (17 weeks) but should begin weaning by 6 months**
- **Infants should all be considered individually as they develop at different rates**
- **Potentially high allergen foods such as egg, fish, milk used in foods and cooking, cheese, yoghurt, wheat and other gluten containing cereals do not need to be delayed until a certain age**
- **Preterm infants need special consideration and 5 - 7 months after their actual birth date is likely to be the best time to begin weaning**

When to begin weaning

The introduction of solid foods alongside an infant's milk feeds is to:

- provide extra energy (calories) and nutrients when breast milk or infant formula no longer supplies them in sufficient amounts to sustain normal growth and optimal health and development
- give infants the opportunity to learn to like new tastes and textures, based on family foods, at a time when they are receptive to them

From 1994 the age range of 4-6 months was considered ideal to begin weaning term infants onto solids (Department of Health 1994). However this was largely misinterpreted by many Health Care Professional (HCPs) to mean that infants should all begin weaning at 4 months of age.

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended in 2001 that exclusive breastfeeding should continue until 6 months of age to protect infants from morbidity and mortality that is associated with gastroenteritis, there has been considerable debate over the ideal age to begin weaning healthy term infants (Platt 2009, Agostoni 2008, Fewtrell 2007, Foote 2003). Gastroenteritis is common in developing countries and is associated with the introduction of formula and complementary foods. Many have questioned whether the WHO recommendation applies to developed countries where the risks from episodes of gastroenteritis are minimal (Fewtrell 2007, Foote 2003, Lanigan 2001). The

debate remains over whether some infants who are not weaned until 6 months may be at risk of micronutrient deficiencies (Lanigan 2001, Butte 2002).

Chronology of Key Recommendations on age to begin weaning in the last 10 years:

1. The 2001 World Health Organization's global strategy for infant and young child feeding revised its guidance and recommended *exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life*. The WHO recommendation applies to populations and it is acknowledged in the document that exclusive breastfeeding to six months could lead to iron deficiency in susceptible infants, and growth faltering and other micronutrient deficiencies in some infants.
2. In 2001 The UK Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) reviewed the evidence from the 2001 World Health Organization's global strategy for infant and young child feeding and advised that:
'there is sufficient scientific evidence that exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months is nutritionally adequate'. However SACN *'noted that early introduction of complementary foods is normal practice in the UK and that mothers do this for many valid personal, social and economic reasons'*. SACN *'therefore recommended that there should be some flexibility in the advice, but that any complementary feeding should not be introduced before the end of 4 months (17 weeks)'*
3. The Department of Health issued a statement on breastfeeding (12/05/03):
'Breastfeeding is the best form of nutrition for infants. Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first six months (26 weeks) of an infant's life as it provides all the nutrients a baby needs.'

Both the recommendations from the WHO and from the UK Department of Health (DH) in 2003 were population recommendations. Both organisations recommended that each infant must be managed individually so that insufficient growth and other adverse outcomes are not ignored and appropriate interventions are provided.

There is a five-week gestational age range of term babies (born between 37 and 42 weeks gestation) and babies grow and develop at different rates. This means some infants will be ready to begin weaning at an earlier postnatal age than others rather than all being ready on one postnatal day (Platt 2009). Mothers usually begin weaning large infants and male infants earlier than others (Wright et al. 2004).

4. ESPGHAN Recommendations 2008 (Agostoni 2008)

The European Society for Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition and the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition reviewed the literature on complementary feeding for healthy term infants in 2008 and recommend that:

- Exclusive breastfeeding for around 6 months is a desirable goal
- Weaning onto solid foods should begin by 6 months but not before 4 months
- Breastfeeding continues throughout weaning particularly the early stages
- Introducing gluten* between 4 and 7 months while breastfeeding may reduce the risk of coeliac disease, type 1 diabetes and wheat allergy
- High allergen foods such as egg and fish do not need to be delayed until after 6 months as there is no evidence that this will reduce the likelihood of allergies

*Foods containing gluten are wheat, rye, barley and oats. These cereals are present in bread, wheat flour, some breakfast cereal and rusks.

No evidence of harm in early weaning

In developed countries there are no reported disadvantages to beginning weaning onto solid foods any time between 4 and 6 months compared with waiting until 6 months. A recent study of hospitalisation rates due to gastroenteritis or respiratory tract infection in the UK showed that these rates were higher in infants fed on infant formula compared to infants being breastfed but were unrelated to the age at which term infants, regardless of their milk feed, are weaned onto solid food (Quigley 2009). This study questions the findings by Forsyth in 1993 that respiratory rates of infections were higher in those weaned before 8 weeks compared to those weaned after 12 weeks (Forsyth 2003). Platt argues that there is no evidence of harm even within populations that begin weaning within a few days of birth (Platt 2009).

Evidence of harm in late weaning

Weaning should not be delayed beyond six months of age as this increases the risk of nutrient and energy deficiencies. Iron deficiency anaemia and rickets is more common in infants weaned after 6 months (DH 1994).

Developmental signs of readiness to feed

In practice the developmental signs that suggest that an infant is ready to accept solid foods are:

- Putting toys and other objects in the mouth
- Chewing fists
- Watching others with interest when they are eating
- Seeming hungry between milk feeds or demanding feeds more often even though larger milk feeds have been offered

These developmental signs are generally seen between 4 and 6 months and this seems to be the best time to start solids because from this age infants learn to accept new tastes and textures relatively quickly (Harris 2000).

Waking at night: Around 4 to 6 months infants may be sleeping less, and may begin to wake again during the night. However night-time waking and crying are not necessarily signs of hunger at this age. Unfortunately many parents hope that weaning onto solid food will help their infant sleep through the night.

Current weaning practices in the UK

Some healthcare professionals advise parents to wait until 6 months to begin weaning but many parents wish to wean earlier than 6 months (Bolling 2007; Fewtrell et al 2003; Foote & Marriott 2003). In the UK about 50% of babies are given solid foods between the ages of 4 and 6 months – the other half are given solids before 4 months (Bolling 2007).

Progressing through the weaning stages

Weaning is a learning process and infants will only learn to accept and enjoy new tastes and textures if they are given the opportunity to try them. Some infants are kept on pureed foods for too long and those in the ALSPAC study who are not offered lumps and finger foods by 9 months are more likely to be fussy eaters at an older age compared to those that were weaned appropriately (Coulter 2009, Northstone 2001).

The type and texture of foods to be introduced at each weaning stage:

Stage	Age guide	Skills to learn	New food textures to introduce
1	Begin 6 months, but not before 4 months (17 weeks)	- taking food from a spoon - moving food from the front of the mouth to the back for swallowing - managing thicker purees and mashed food	Smooth purees Mashed foods
2	6 - 9 months	- moving lumps around the mouth - chewing lumps - self-feeding using hands and fingers - sipping from a cup	Mashed food with soft lumps Soft finger foods Liquids in a lidded beaker or cup
3	9 -12 months	- chewing minced and chopped food - self-feeding attempts with a spoon	Hard finger foods Minced and chopped family foods

Adapted from Clinical Paediatric Dietetics 3rd ed. 2007

Once infants are competent in eating solid food, a variety of foods from all 4 food groups should be included daily in the weaning diet to provide the range of nutrients they need. Ideally these foods should be the nutritious family foods that infants will be expected to eat during their toddler years:

The 4 food groups are:

1. starchy foods – potatoes, rice, oats, pasta and other cereals
2. meat, fish, eggs, smooth nut butters and pulses such as lentils, dhal, hummus
3. fruits and vegetables
4. full fat yogurt and cheese. Full fat milk can also be used during cooking.

Weaning babies born prematurely

Each premature baby (born before 37 weeks gestation) should be considered individually and 5 to 7 months after their actual birth date is likely to be the best time to begin weaning (King 2007, 2006). Many of the organ systems develop precociously following preterm delivery and it is considered safe to wean preterm infants at this time even though their age may be less than 4 months after their Estimated Date of Delivery (EDD).

As growth and nutritional status can be issues in this group, careful attention is needed to supply a diet of sufficient nutrient density and variety. They often need vitamin, mineral, and sometimes protein and energy supplements - particularly those that are breastfed.

In addition it is important not to miss the opportune times when the introduction of textures and flavours are more easily accepted.

All young babies, especially those born prematurely, need back and head support when they are fed to minimise the risk of choking.

The Paediatric Group of the British Dietetic Association concludes that:

- Breastfeeding is the best form of nutrition for healthy infants and can provide complete nutrition for the first 6 months (26 weeks) of life for some infants.
- Breastfeeding mothers need appropriate nutritional advice (including advice on vitamin D supplementation) to ensure that their breast milk provides good nutrition for their babies (Mughal 1999; Shaw & Pal 2002; Savoie & Rioux 2002). Despite these measures, some infants may experience a faltering in their growth or show evidence of nutritional deficiencies when exclusively breastfed for 6 months (Butte et al 2002; Lanigan et al 2001). Therefore, individual circumstances need to be considered when professionals are giving advice on the introduction of solid foods.
- Each infant should be managed individually and developmental signs of readiness for solid food in the infant and parental opinions should be taken into consideration when advising on the ideal age to begin weaning an infant.
- Weaning onto solid foods should begin by 6 months but not before 4 months (17 weeks).
- Infants who are weaned at or near 6 months will need to be moved from smooth pureed foods onto the second stage of weaning more quickly than those weaned earlier to ensure continued development of normal feeding behaviour and continued nutritional adequacy. In particular mashed food with soft lumps and soft finger foods and foods high in iron including meat, oily fish and pulses should be introduced from around 6 months.
- Further studies to clarify the ideal age range for commencing weaning should continue.
- The age range recommended for beginning weaning should not be changed unless there is strong scientific evidence as frequent changes in policy undermine the credibility of HCPs with parents.

- Preterm infants are a special case and advice should be sought from the dietitian and medical team who are caring for them. More information is available on weaning preterm infants from BLISS 'The premature baby charity': www.BLISS.org.uk
- Whatever feeding decisions parents make (breastfeeding or formula feeding; early or later weaning) they need to be supported and given appropriate advice to ensure that all infants are fed safely and are having a nutritionally adequate diet.

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