

**Hi, Stacy from Semi-Crunchy Mama here.** In this section we're going to talk about:

- the equipment you need to start feeding your baby (and what you don't)
- the important difference between gagging and choking
- the only 2 rules you need to remember
- and what foods to offer first

First off, stuff.

All you really need is a baby and a place to sit!

It's messy, so I suggest placing a towel/mat/tablecloth/shower curtain/dog under the highchair. We get the super cheap shower curtain liners from IKEA and just hose it off once a week.

Pouch bibs are great since baby will quickly learn to fish dropped food out of the pouch and less ends up on the floor.

You don't need utensils or bowls right away, and they usually just get thrown anyway. I DO love the EZPZ mat which suctions onto a tray or table and gives baby an edge to pick up food more easily. They're also great to take to restaurants.

Most baby spoons on the market are made for feeding purees, so the handles are too long for baby to use on their own. I like the small metal appetizer sets from Cost Plus World Market. They're cheap, dishwasher safe, and the bowl of the spoon isn't so ridiculous.

I do suggest offering water which I actually give in a regular baby bottle to start. Some babies who get bottles frequently get upset if it's not milk or formula, but my kids never cared. Then I switch them to straw cups which I'll talk about later.

If you haven't taken an infant CPR class, you may want to, or brush up on what to do just in case of choking.

Now one important item is knowing the difference between gagging and choking. Gagging is, as I mentioned earlier, a natural protective mechanism to prevent

choking. Adults still gag. When babies gag it can be scary: their faces turn red, they can cough or vomit, but they work the food out on their own. My mantra is, "If he's coughing, he's breathing." Choking is when an object obstructs baby's airway and they can't breathe. Choking is silent, and babies don't yet know the international gesture for choking. This is when you'd want to pick baby up, place him or her over your forearm, and strike their back to dislodge the food. This is not likely so long as you don't give your baby choking hazards, though adults who have been eating for decades still choke.

This will sound weird, but go to YouTube and watch some videos of babies gagging. I have a few links for you. It's much less emotionally-charged when you're watching someone else's baby gag and you know they're fine at the end.

Also, if you haven't started signing with your baby, this is a great time to learn a little ASL! Signing helps your baby communicate before they can speak and greatly decreases frustration for both of you. You can take a class which is a great way to learn and meet other families, or I just looked them up on Google on my phone. I recommend starting with "eat," "more," "milk," and "all done" at the minimum. Add "please," "drink," and "water" to level up. Then it's fun to add other foods, animals, feelings, etc, but that is a good foundation.

Now, the good stuff. There are only two rules! Ready?

Rule 1: you never put anything in baby's mouth

Rule 2: never leave baby unattended while eating

If you put food in your baby's mouth, he or she isn't in control and it increases the risk of choking. You can hold the food and offer bites, but let baby lean in or grab the food from you.

Rule 2 is purely for safety and again, choking risks. That's it! The end!

...Just kidding. What and how do you actually feed them?

First foods should be soft enough to squish easily between your fingers, and about the size of your index finger or a French fry. Please don't start with actual

french fries. Many people think they should start with smaller food, but we want to work with baby's skills. Longer sticks of food are easier for baby to pick up and get to his or her mouth. Once at their mouth, they have to break off a piece to chew. If they do that, if they can't chew it enough to swallow, they'll spit it out or gag to prevent choking. If they chew it enough to swallow it, they can.

Great first foods are sweet potato, cooked carrots, roasted squash, pear, and banana. A lot of people love avocado, but it's a little slippery and can be rich for some babies. Not a bad option, just wanted to warn you.

I'm not terribly conservative, but I do recommend waiting 2-3 days between new foods at first just to get used to it and to watch for food reactions. If you start with a lot of ingredients and your baby reacts, it's harder to track down the source. If possible, offer new foods in the morning. That way if your baby does react, it's at a time you already plan to be awake. It's also easier to clean up vomit during the day.

Many moms ask about preserving their milk supply, especially if they are back at work. First, remember that breastmilk and/or formula will be baby's main source of nutrition for at least the first year, so it's more important that baby ingests milk than solids. I recommend nursing 30-60 minutes before mealtimes. You don't need to start a timer, but that gives baby time to digest before mealtime. Some babies will really take to solids, others will warm up more slowly. Again, BABY LED weaning, so watch their cues! Even if baby starts loving on solids during the day, he or she may still nurse all night.

Also keep in mind that they may not ingest very much at the beginning. I would cut up and roast a sweet potato, offer a few pieces, stick it back in the fridge, and repeat for a few days until it was gone or until it seemed like a safety hazard.

You do NOT need to start with veggies before fruits. Breastmilk and formula are both sweet, and we're biologically made to like sweet, calorie-dense foods. After 6 months of milk, it doesn't matter what order. Most veggies you will have to cook, one exception being thin cucumber slices which are great for teething as they're naturally cooling. As for fruits, so long as they're soft, they're fair game!

You do have a chart in your handout of suggested foods by age and stage. These are not firm rules, merely ideas to get you started. Follow your baby's lead of what he or she is capable of navigating. My youngest has much better fine motor skills than my oldest did, so he was eating beans and peas and such at an earlier age.

After introducing single foods, you can gradually transition into regular table food with multiple ingredients. For the most part you can feed them what you're eating. They can start eating soft meat and eggs right away. You can cook with herbs and spices, though some babies don't like hot spicy food (like mine). Others do! My youngest son's first food was sweet potato with cumin and mild chili powder, and he loved it. You can serve a deconstructed version of your meal, like just the filling of tacos or enchiladas.

I talked about some easy foods to start with, so what should you avoid?

You've probably heard that babies shouldn't have **honey** until they're a year old. This is due to the possible presence of naturally occurring botulism spores which live in the soil and can contaminate the honey. Adults' developed immune systems can fight this off, but infants are at risk. Heat does not kill botulism, so this includes pasteurized honey and honey in baked goods. Nerd alert: there are around 100 cases of infant botulism each year, though it's not clear how many of them are food-related. Of those cases, 93% of them are in babies younger than 6 months old. So once your baby is over 6 months, there is an extremely low risk from honey, but now you know.

As I mentioned earlier, once you feel comfortable giving your baby fruits and veggies, you can start transitioning to the same foods you're eating. That said, most Americans eat too much **salt**, most of which comes from packaged and restaurant food. Babies can't tolerate much salt at all as it can easily throw off the electrolyte balance of their tiny systems. For the first several months at least, avoid cooking with salt, and limit processed and restaurant foods just for safety. My kids are giant, over 20 pounds by 6 months old, so I gauge when they can eat more salt by their water intake and how much food they're eating. I'll talk about water later.

What about **rice cereal**? Rice cereal was recommended as a first food because very few people react to rice and it's bland. Now we know that babies don't need to eat bland foods. They're exposed to various flavors via amniotic fluid during pregnancy, and if you breastfeed, the flavor of your milk changes day to day, as well based on nutrient content and what you eat. Babies will make funny faces at new flavors because they're new, not necessarily because they dislike them. But rice cereal is a starchy filler without any real nutrition other than fortified vitamins. Replacing that room in their tummy that could be filled with nutritious breastmilk or formula, or real food makes about as much sense as eating candy for breakfast.

What about other **grains**? Some people have heard that babies can't digest grains until after a year old. This isn't exactly true. Amylase is the enzyme that helps break down starches, and in adults, it's mostly found in our saliva. Babies don't have salivary amylase because they can't chew yet, but it starts to increase around 4 months, and pancreatic amylase levels are at 2/3 of adult levels by then. So salivary amylase isn't full strength at 6 months, but they're still amateur chewers as well. To be fair, most adults are as well and don't chew enough. It's a really simple way to improve your digestion, though.

Grains also tend to be binding. Think of when you've used the BRAT diet after being sick: bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. That's to prevent vomiting and diarrhea, and it's binding on purpose. What are foods we love to give babies? Bananas, rice cereal, applesauce, and oatmeal. So while I feed my kids oatmeal in the morning since I eat it myself, I never bought baby oatmeal, and didn't feed them so much that it affected their digestion. If you want to wait on grains, it won't hurt them, but don't be scared to offer.

**Milk** is another food to avoid. We'll talk about allergies next, but dairy is an allergen for 2-3% of babies. If you're nursing and your baby has a cow's milk protein intolerance, hold off on dairy for 9-12 months. For other babies, cheese and yogurt are fine, though dairy can be binding as well. Cow's milk itself should wait until a year, and that's because you don't want it to replace breastmilk or formula. That's because cow's milk is a beverage, not a food, and doesn't have all

the nutrients breastmilk or formula do. Since the majority of your baby's nutrition is still coming from breastmilk or formula, you don't want to replace that with cow's milk until at least a year old.

Three more foods to avoid that might surprise you are **strawberries, tomatoes, and citrus**. First off, these can cause allergic reactions in some kids which are frequently outgrown, but the high acid content can cause diaper rash which isn't fun for anybody. (Or anybody.) We still do tomato sauce and tomato-based soups like chili, but I try to limit it to once a week to prevent issues. It just makes their poop so acidic.

Then there are some **choking hazards** you'll want to watch out for. When you can offer these might depend on when your baby get molars. Whole nuts are too crunchy until they have enough teeth. My oldest cut his first tooth the day before he turned 6 months and had 16 teeth by his first birthday. He started with cashews around 18 months. If your baby doesn't have that many teeth, wait until they can chew!

Popcorn is technically a choking hazard until age 6 because of unpopped kernels, but use your best judgment on that one.

Whole grapes and cherry tomatoes should be sliced in quarters as they're just the size of a baby windpipe.

The biggest causes of children choking are actually popped latex balloons and hot dogs, so be careful at birthday parties and slice hot dogs, sausages, and carrots lengthwise, not into coins.

In the study I mentioned a while ago, the biggest causes of choking with BLW infants were raw apples (30%) and hard crackers. Either sauté or microwave apples a bit, slice them very thinly, or avoid them if you're worried. My baby wasn't eating whole apples at that point, so I sliced them very thin since that's how I like to eat them. I never peeled apples for him, and he either spit the small bits of peel out, or eventually ate the apple like a watermelon by holding the peel like rind. Now at 4, he'll eat a whole apple but just started asking for them peeled.

Invariably someone asks me when they "can" start offering juice to their baby. My preferred answer is "never," simply because it isn't necessary. You're better off eating fruit that has fiber and isn't pasteurized versus glorified sugar water. My kids do get green juice that we make at home, but it's mostly kale and not much sugar. If you DO give juice, make sure you dilute it with water, and you're better off giving juice once a day to minimize sugar exposure on their teeth. Water and milk are plenty.

Next, we'll talk about food allergies.

*If you liked that class I would be honored if you recommend it to friends and family.  
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