

Baby-Led Weaning: What You Need to Know

Here's the scoop on one healthy way to feed your baby

During their first few years of life, babies reach many important milestones: first smile, first laugh, first crawl, first steps. In between all these, babies also learn an abundance of important life skills, such as how to feed themselves. In the process, *what* they eat evolves.

“Babies will gradually transition off of a full breast milk or formula diet to a varied diet of solid foods,” says pediatrician Kimberly Churbock, MD.

What this transition looks like varies because there are multiple ways babies can learn how to feed themselves. One option is baby-led weaning, or baby-led feeding.

What is baby-led weaning?

When babies are learning how to feed themselves, they'll commonly start eating exclusively pureed foods and then progress through different (and increasingly more complex) stages of pre-made baby foods before graduating to solids. Until babies are strong enough to eat on their own, parents focus on spoon feeding.

Baby-led weaning flips the script and puts babies in charge of mealtime.

“The basic idea behind baby-led weaning is that parents and caregivers can follow a baby's lead,” says Dr. Churbock. “This means watching for signs of developmental readiness and, when a baby is ready, allowing them to self-feed.”

Babies are also skipping many traditional baby foods such as purees, Dr. Churbock says. “With baby-led weaning, instead of buying or making specific foods to feed your baby, you’re preparing the same meal for the whole family, with modifications as needed for your newest eater.”

This doesn’t mean that babies are starting off chowing down on whole pieces of pizza, of course. “You’re incorporating baby into family mealtime from the get-go, allowing your baby to eat some of the same foods that the rest of the family is eating,” she says, “but being mindful of portions for your littlest eater, and what is going to be safe and appropriate for them.”

The benefits of baby-led weaning

Baby-led weaning offers multiple advantages for families and babies alike.

It saves time and money

Not only are you cutting down on meal prep time because everyone’s eating similar things — but you’re also hopefully saving money. “Baby food can be expensive,” says Dr. Churbock. “If you’re preparing the same food for the whole family, you’re not necessarily having to buy something separate and special.”

Babies experience valuable social interactions

Baby-led weaning introduces babies to the idea of family mealtime, which offers positive social and developmental reinforcement. “Whenever possible, it’s wonderful for families to eat together,” says Dr. Churbock. “That way babies can see a role model for how to chew, how to swallow. They learn a lot by watching us eat.”

They are exposed to diverse foods

Both pureed and pre-packaged baby food have soft textures. With baby-led weaning, babies are exposed to a greater variety of foods — and, by extension, a much broader array of tastes and textures.

It helps hone important developmental skills

Allowing babies to gauge their own appetite — and sense of hunger and fullness — is enormously valuable. “Over time, they can self-regulate,” says Dr. Churbock. “They’re not going to overeat because they’re in control of what’s going in their mouth and what they’re swallowing.”

Babies also have a chance to try out tasks requiring the use of fine motor skills.

“They’ll practice picking up a piece of food, bringing it to their mouth, manipulating it to get it into the mouth, chewing and swallowing,” Dr. Churbock adds. “All of those actions require fine motor skills and oral motor skills.”

When to start baby-led weaning

A baby is ready for baby-led weaning when they display certain signs of developmental readiness. Dr. Churbock says these include the ability to sit upright, with minimal to no support from a parent or caregiver, as well as reaching for an object — and then picking it up and bringing it to their mouth — and a diminishing tongue-thrust reflex (that’s the term for when they use their tongue to spit something out of their mouth).

The majority of babies reach the above developmental milestones around 6 months. However, “every baby is different,” Dr. Churbock says. Babies who were born early or premature especially might start doing these things at a later age. “You may be watching more for these signs of readiness closer to their corrected age of 6 months (if they had been born on their actual due date), rather than their chronological age of 6 months.”

Luckily, baby-led weaning meets babies where they are. “This is an approach to feeding that can work and meet children of different ages and abilities where they’re at,” says Dr. Churbock. “At its best, the idea of baby-led weaning should really follow and meet the needs of an individual baby.”

How safe is baby-led weaning?

In general, when babies are learning how to feed themselves, they should always be seated upright and well-supported, and they should always be supervised. Parents and caregivers should also limit distractions, Dr. Churbock says. “Avoid eating with the TV on whenever possible.”

And while a baby gagging can be quite frightening, this is actually perfectly normal. “It’s part of a baby actually using muscles properly and protecting their airway,” Dr. Churbock says.

As with any new skill or milestone, parents may have concerns about safety. For peace of mind, Dr. Churbock recommends parents and caregivers take a child infant CPR course, which will cover important things such as choking management.

Baby-led weaning itself specifically shouldn’t be cause for great alarm. “For babies who are learning a new skill, we want to make sure that it’s as safe as it possibly can be,” says Dr. Churbock. “Studies have shown baby-led weaning, when done properly, isn’t a higher risk for choking.”

However, if babies can’t sit upright with minimal or no support, or if they’re not quite yet reaching for objects and bringing them to the mouth, those are signs they aren’t ready for baby-led weaning.

Babies who still have a prominent tongue-thrust reflex, which is commonly seen in infants up until about 6 months of age, also likely aren’t quite there yet.

Great first foods

Cut soft foods into “finger-sized” slices that are made for grasping, says Dr. Churbock. “The food is firm enough that they can pick it up and hold it, long enough that they can have a little portion sticking out of their hand that they can see, and soft enough to gum and chew.” Some examples include:

- Spears of soft ripe fruits, such as banana, pear, avocado, kiwi and mango.
- Strips of roasted, baked or steamed vegetables, such as sweet potatoes, carrots and squash.
- Ground meat or soft, shredded strips of meat that you can move your fingers through

You don't have to avoid pureed textures completely to do baby-led feeding. “As adults, we eat soft-textured foods, too,” says Dr. Churbock. “Soft foods like oatmeal, applesauce, and plain whole fat or Greek yogurt are great early foods for babies.”

Foods to avoid

Because baby-led weaning exposes babies to foods with different textures, you should avoid serving up foods that are choking hazards. These include:

- Firm, round foods, such as whole berries and whole grapes.
- Hard, crunchy foods like tortilla or corn chips, popcorn, nuts.
- Raw, hard-textured vegetables like carrots.
- Peanut butter offered alone, which can be too sticky for babies to safely manage.

Dr. Churbock does add that some of the foods above can be served if you prepare them differently. “You'd mush a blueberry to make it a little bit softer or cut it into smaller pieces. For older babies, you're going to quarter grapes rather than offering them whole.”

Babies under the age of 1 also should never ingest certain foods, including:

- Honey, because of the risk of botulism.
- Whole cow's milk to drink, because of the risk of digestive tract bleeding and not having the right mix of nutrients. However, small amounts used in cooking or food preparation are generally acceptable, as are other dairy products like yogurt and cheese.

When to introduce allergens

Peanut butter and yogurt can also be allergens. Talk to your child's pediatrician to learn more about introducing allergenic foods and for further advice on the best early foods to feed your baby. "For most infants, potentially allergenic foods are also important to incorporate early on and often," says Dr. Churbock. "Some are also great textures for early eaters, like soft strips of egg omelet, or pieces of moist flaky fish like salmon."

How do I start baby-led weaning?

Before settling on baby-led weaning, Dr. Churbock says parents should first gather as much information as they can — you can often find books on baby-led weaning at your local library — and talk to their baby's pediatrician.

"Around 4 months of age, start those discussions about how you hope to feed your baby, and what steps you can take for your individual child at that age," she says. "Talking to your pediatrician is going to be a great first step to go over what to look out for and resources that might be helpful."

This applies if you're thinking about baby-led weaning or instead of starting your baby out on purees, Dr. Churbock adds. "Either approach can be appropriate depending on your goals and your individual child's healthcare needs."

Looping a pediatrician or even a speech pathologist into your feeding plans is especially helpful if your baby has unique healthcare considerations such as prematurity; a disorder such as dysphagia, which affects swallowing and feeding; or drinks specialized or thickened formulas. “It’s worth reviewing if there are modifications that can work for most children,” Dr. Churbock says.

Parents and babies can also ease into baby-led weaning together. For example, you might help a baby hold a spoonful of puree, but then allow them to move the spoon to their mouth on their own. “Even if it’s for a short period of time, many babies still do benefit from trying some purees to start,” she says. “You pre-load the spoon, and then your baby can hold the spoon. That’s a nice, easy way to get started.”

However, don’t be afraid to let your baby eat with their hands. “Expect and embrace some mess,” Dr. Churbock says. “Self-feeding is a great sensory experience for babies.”

Dr. Churbock says you also shouldn’t worry if your baby doesn’t actually consume much food when first starting solids. “It can take some time for babies to figure out complementary food feeding, and breast milk or formula remains the most important source of nutrition through the first year of life.”

And, above all, if baby-led weaning is slow-going or even isn’t working out, that’s perfectly OK. “There are multiple healthy ways to feed your baby,” Dr. Churbock says. “Feeding methods aren’t always one-size-fits-all, and you don’t have to do things in a certain way.”