

All you need to know about complementary feeding for your baby

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Breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months of a baby's life is the most natural way to feed your baby. However, what comes next is also important because of the extraordinary growth and development that takes place in the first 1000 days of an infant's life.



After six months of age, breastmilk is no longer sufficient as the only food source. For example, there's not enough iron and zinc in breastmilk to meet a baby's growing needs for these micro-nutrients after the age of six months. Mothers are definitely encouraged to continue breastfeeding, but also advised to introduce small amounts of soft, nutrient-dense foods as complementary feeding.

Estelle Strydom, registered dietitian and [ADSA](#) spokesperson (The Association for Dietetics in South Africa) says, "A 2018 review of complementary feeding practices in South Africa revealed that the diets of many older infants do not meet the criteria for a minimally acceptable diet. In addition, it was reported that many babies between six months and one year are regularly given processed meats, soft drinks, sweets and salty crisps, which are all nutrient-poor foods that are not suitable for babies."

Furthermore, Professor Lize Havemann-Nel, registered dietitian and researcher in the Centre of Excellence for Nutrition at North-West University, also points out that your baby's nutrition is a vital part of a foundation for a healthy life. There's no other time when a child grows and develops faster; it's both a window of opportunity to set your child on the path to good health, and a time of great vulnerability. Malnutrition, in all its forms, from underweight and overweight to the nutritional deficiencies that cause lasting damage, can be avoided through optimal complementary feeding.

Professor Havemann-Nel says, "It's important to get the timing right by introducing complementary foods from six months onwards. It's also vital to know what foods are appropriate so that you are providing your little one with a variety of nutrient-dense meals and avoiding harmful practices. The other goal of complementary feeding is to set your baby up to try new foods so that as they grow they transition to eating nutrient-dense family foods, which makes life much easier for parents and caregivers."

Registered Dietitian, Mbali Mapholi emphasises the importance of parents' awareness of the accepted complementary feeding guidelines. She says, "Parents and caregivers need to understand what nutrient-dense foods are suitable for their

babies. The transition from only breastmilk to suitable complementary foods, along with continued breastfeeding, works well if the food offered to baby is soft and easy to digest, which is why the first solid foods are usually pureed and mashed. We start out with mashed, soft foods, and as they develop, the food becomes more textured and soft finger foods can be offered.”

An important guideline is that meat, fish, chicken and eggs should be offered daily. Mbali says, “These foods are high in protein which is essential for growth and development. They also contain important vitamins and minerals that support the immune system and healthy body functioning. Eating these foods every day prevents deficiencies of important nutrients such as iron. Plant protein sources such as soya, beans, peas and lentils are affordable and are also important to include in the diet regularly.”

Another important nutrition guideline is making dark green leafy vegetables and orange-coloured fruit and veg available daily to your baby. Mbali says, “Spinach is easy for us to grow in our gardens or in pots so that we can harvest the leaves we need each day, while the plant keeps on growing and providing more. Vegetables such as butternut and carrots, and fruits such as citrus, paw-paw and mangoes are good sources of vitamins A and C that help to maintain your baby’s good health. It works out well to buy seasonal fruit and veg because it’s more economical.”

For a toddler between 12 and 36 months, you need to provide five small meals per day with starchy foods in most meals. Dairy such as milk, maas and yoghurt should be consumed every day – 500ml is recommended so that your child gets sufficient calcium intake for strong bones and healthy teeth.

There’s also a list of nutrient-poor foods that parents and caregivers need to stay clear of:

- Avoid tea and coffee as these drinks contain caffeine
- Avoid sugary drinks and juices which are high in sugar
- Avoid highly processed and high fat foods
- Avoid salty foods

Registered dietitian, Carey Haupt says, “Under 12 months of age, a baby’s kidneys are not yet fully developed. These types of unsuitable foods can put strain on the kidneys. Foods that are high in sugar and fat can lead to overweight and childhood obesity, which is an increasing problem in South Africa. Use herbs for flavour instead of adding salt. Substitute clean water in place of juices and soft drinks that are high in sugar and can damage new teeth.”

Carey says, “It makes good sense at this very young age to let your baby play with their food. Picking up a stem of broccoli enables them to look, feel, smell and taste. By letting them explore and interact with new foods, you may avoid picky eating later on.”

[ADSA has released a series of three short, informative videos about complementary feeding for South African parents and caregivers](#). Join the ADSA dietitian team to learn more about the nutrients that babies require after six months of age; get tips on how to make complementary feeding easy for you, and for baby. Each episode also features a recipe for a simple yet nutrient-dense complementary baby meal that is quick and convenient for busy moms and caregivers.

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