

Meal Ideas for Young Children

Teaching an infant to eat ... helping him get the nutrients he needs to grow and develop ... are basic duties of parenting but ones on which parents often need guidance. To reduce confusion in your kitchen, **hang the following serving suggestions on your refrigerator** and refer to them as often as needed.

4 to 6 months

Although breast milk or formula remains the main source of nutrition and calories for the first 4 to 6 months, this is the age to start introducing an infant to solid foods. If you feel your baby is ready to try “real” food — she is interested in watching you eat, she seems unsatisfied by just a bottle — it is time to add smooth single foods to her diet. Although you should consult your child’s pediatrician before starting solids, general first steps include

- 1) **Rice cereal.** Mix plain infant rice cereal with breast milk or formula. A baby won’t digest much until he gets the hang of swallowing from a spoon, so just serve one meal a day until his ability and intake improve.
- 2) **Pureed fruits and vegetables.** As a baby gets better at eating, introduce new single-ingredient foods. Good starters include pureed apples, sweet potatoes, carrots, pears, or bananas. Stay away from foods like nuts, uncooked carrots, popcorn, or grapes that are difficult to chew.
- 3) **One time a day.** Introduce solids once a day and add a second feeding when your baby is eating two to three tablespoons of solids at a sitting.
- 4) **One food at a time.** To make sure a baby is not allergic to a specific food, introduce one new food at a time and wait several days before you try another new food.

6 to 8 months

Although breast milk or formula is still the mainstay of your infant’s diet, you can **begin exposing him to a greater variety of flavors and thicker textures**:

- 1) **Combine foods of different flavors.** Good mixes include rice and pureed fruit; pureed fruits and vegetables, like apples and sweet potatoes, with pureed chicken or turkey; mashed avocado and bananas.
- 2) **New food suggestions.** Whole grain — wheat breads and cereals, like Cheerios.[®] Dairy products — yogurt and mild cheese. New fruits — mangoes and peaches (small enough to ensure no choking). Meats — chicken or lean ground beef (pureed or chopped).
- 3) **Don’t force a baby to eat.** If a baby refuses a new food, continue to offer the food to her at future meals. Give her a chance to get used to the new taste but do not force her to eat it.
- 4) **Multiple meals.** By now, meals should occur at least two if not three times a day.

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8 to 18 months

As a baby's motor skills develop, he will begin to be able to pick up food from his high-chair tray and by 12 months, he should be weaned from the bottle and drinking from a cup. This opens up a whole new world of foods:

- 1) **Bite-size pieces.** Make sure that foods are big enough to pick up yet small enough to swallow.
- 2) **Soft and gummable.** Although a baby may have some teeth, at this age, she is probably still mashing food with her gums rather than chewing.
- 3) **Hard foods for teething.** Your baby will probably enjoy teething biscuits or a piece of a frozen bagel to soothe swollen gums.
- 4) **Good finger foods include** soft cheeses, soft noodles combined with butter or tomato sauce or cheese, waffles covered with pureed fruit, soft breaded chicken nuggets, and steamed vegetables like carrots and green beans.

18 to 24 months

At this age, toddlers should be eating most table foods and sitting down for meals with the rest of the family. Serving suggestions for this age include

- 1) **Manageable pieces.** Serve sandwiches, pizza, and hamburgers in miniature sizes.
- 2) **Quick preparation.** Toddlers are generally short on patience, so try to offer foods that are healthy yet easy to make: peanut butter and jelly, scrambled eggs and cheese, vegetable sticks and dips like cream cheese or avocado and spinach dip; cheese and crackers or homemade Popsicles[®] made from fruit puree.
- 3) **Creative presentation.** Make eating interesting. Cut sandwiches into fun shapes; decorate patterns and faces on pizza bagels; serve toast and crackers with vegetables and cheese or fresh fruit arranged by color.
- 4) **Multiple small meals a day.**
- 5) **Avoid foods that would cause choking, such as whole grapes, popcorn, or uncooked carrots.**

24 months and older

By now a child should be self-feeding most table foods, although most of the suggestions for 18 to 24 months still apply:

- 1) **More creative serving.** Use multicolored pasta for pasta dishes. The different colors also tend to offer more nutrients as well as color. Add fresh fruit to Jell-O[®] cubes molded into different shapes.
- 2) **Introduce a child to cooking.** Have a child help you prepare meals. Put him in charge of mixing ingredients, spreading butter, topping a pizza, etc. This type of involvement may increase his interest in food as well as make him feel good about himself.
- 3) **Offer healthy minimeals to refuel.** Because toddlers are so active, they need quick fixes of nutrition in between the main three meals. Healthy ideas include apple slices with honey, rice cakes with cheese, bananas blended with yogurt and frozen in paper cups; kiwi, strawberries and cream cheese, and a whole-wheat bagel or noodles with cottage cheese.

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