

SELF-PACED LESSON

After reading this lesson, click the survey link at the end to answer a few questions and receive nutrition education credit for your class.

# Baby Self-Feeding



**What do you know about baby self-feeding?**

## Baby self-feeding provides your child the opportunity to explore different textures and learn independence in eating as soon as they are developmentally ready.

**Babies who learn to feed themselves are better able to control how much food they eat and how quickly they eat it. Self-feeding also gives babies the chance to explore the food in different ways, and try it at their own pace. This may even help them become more adventurous eaters when they are older!**

In most cases, babies should receive only breastmilk or infant formula until they are developmentally ready to try solid foods, usually around 6 months of age. Even after solids are started, breast milk or formula will continue to provide most of your child's nutrition throughout the first year. Remember, babies have tiny tummies and do not need large servings of solid foods.

Spoon-feeding your baby can be a great way to introduce first tastes and help them learn how to manage and swallow those first pureed bites. But it is important for older babies to be involved in the process of eating too.



**If your baby is able to do the following, talk to your healthcare provider or WIC nutritionist about next steps in the self-feeding process:**

1. Sit up without support
2. Pick up items with hands and bring to mouth
3. Suck purees off a spoon when you offer them and swallow without difficulty

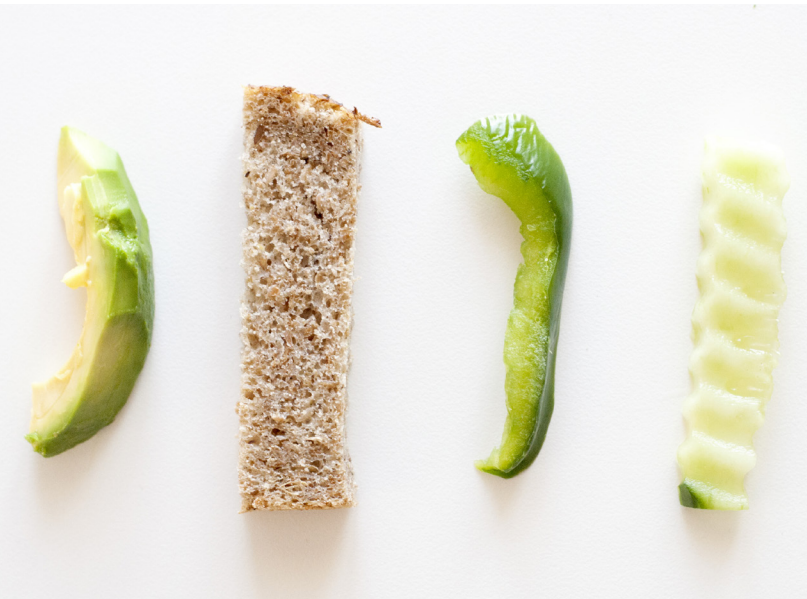
Babies who do not show these signs of readiness are at increased risk of choking. Choking is when food blocks the airway and baby cannot breathe. You may not be able to hear when a baby is choking. Even if your baby does show signs that they are ready for solids, it is important to ALWAYS monitor them while they are eating and watch their pace, chewing and swallowing.





### Moving past purees:

Once you are sure baby can safely eat purees, you can begin to introduce small, soft, pea-size cubes of age-appropriate foods.



When baby has had time to practice and is comfortable managing pea-sized cubes of soft foods, these foods can next be cut into strips about the width of your pinky finger.

- Even after introducing foods with more texture, it is ok to keep offering purees and mashed food that baby can practice feeding themselves with infant utensils.

Avoid foods that are hard, raw, sticky, crunchy, chewy, or round shaped as these can increase the risk of choking.

- Examples of high risk choking foods that should NOT be given to baby are: hot dogs, grapes, raw apples, peanut butter, popcorn and chewing gum.





**Self-feeding can be messy, but it gives baby the chance to explore the food with all of their senses.** Embrace the mess now, it will help them be better eaters later! Strip them down to a diaper or put on a good quality bib and let them explore what's on their high chair tray.

### Ways babies explore foods through self-feeding:

- **Sight:** they can inspect the food up close, at their own pace, and from different angles when feeding themselves.
- **Touch and texture:** touching the food with their hands, on their lips and face, and in their mouth helps babies learn about the temperature and feel of different foods.
- **Smell:** sense of smell plays a huge role in eating and taste. When babies self-feed, they can take their time and enjoy the smell of their food while they interact with it.
- **Sound:** different foods make different noises when you pick them up, smash them, tap them on a surface, and chew them. Self-feeding helps babies learn about the different sounds during mealtimes.
- **Taste:** when babies are able to feed themselves at their own pace, they can choose which foods to eat and in which order based on what they prefer.

### A few more tips:

- It may take several tries before new foods are accepted. Just because a baby makes a funny face when eating a new food, that does NOT mean they don't (or won't eventually) like it! They may just be processing the senses they are experiencing. This is one of the benefits of self-feeding— if they reach for more, you know they enjoyed it!
- Babies will not always eat the same amount or the same types of foods, and that is ok! If they do not eat much at one meal, they will probably make up for it the next (plus they will have breastmilk or formula in between). It may take several tries before baby will taste a new food, but keep offering and letting them interact with the foods in front of them.
- Pull your baby's highchair up to the table and let them eat with the rest of the family. This lets them feel included in the meal and learn new skills (plus, it is easier for you to keep an eye on them).
- Offer your baby foods similar to what the rest of the family is eating. Your baby watches what you do and wants to copy it. If you're serving them cooked vegetables, you should have some on your plate too!
- Avoid distractions during meals to reduce the risk of choking and increase their interest in eating. Children are better able to focus on the food in front of them when TVs, tablets and phones are out of view.

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**One More Step**

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