

Spoon-feeding your baby is a very exciting time for parents. It is an indicator that your baby is growing up and moving out of the newborn stage.

How do I know when my child is ready to spoon-feed?

Between 4-6 months your baby will start giving you cues that she is ready to start spoon-feeding. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends waiting until a child is at least 4 months of age before introducing spoon-feeding. A variety of circumstances can impact a start date such as feeding and swallowing disorders, prematurity, and food allergies, however most babies are ready for spoon-feeding between 4-6 months of age. Some babies at 4 months of age will still present with a tongue thrust reflex which is a protective reflex in which the tongue pushes out anything besides liquid that is placed into your baby's mouth. If your baby has the tongue thrust reflex and is less than 5 ½ months of age, simply wait a few days to weeks and try again. If your baby is 5 ½ months of age or older and still pushes out the spoon or the puree, you should discuss this with your pediatrician as a referral for a feeding evaluation may be indicated.

If your baby is ready to spoon-feed:

- She will be able to sit independently or with minimal support,
- She has good head control (to support the swallowing mechanism)
- She mouths objects (which prepares the mouth for new tastes and textures)
- She shows interest in foods by watching you eat

What kind of spoon should I use?

Find a spoon that has a flat bowl and is small enough to fit on the middle of your baby's tongue.

What if my baby doesn't open his mouth wide enough to place the spoon easily?

Anticipating the spoon with a wide-open mouth is a typical response during feeding. If your baby does not open his mouth wide, you may need to have your child's feeding skills evaluated for any problems that may inhibit this typical feeding behavior. The sooner addressed, the less likely it will be to negatively impact feeding skills.

How do I get started?

Find a time when your baby is hungry but not starving. Sometimes it is recommended, especially for the first time, to breast or bottle feed to take the edge off hunger so your baby will not be fussy and is able to be successful. Make sure that your first food is mixed into a thin puree without any texture. This will reduce the chance that your baby will gag because of the new texture. Remember until now, they have only had thin liquids in their mouths. Something thicker can accidentally trigger the gag reflex. Place the spoon so that your baby can see that it is coming and that she can anticipate the spoon by opening her mouth. If she doesn't open, gently touch the spoon to her bottom lip so that she knows that the spoon is there. If she still doesn't open her mouth, gently place a small amount on her lip so that she can taste what is coming. Once she opens her mouth for the spoon, make sure that you place the spoon as close to the middle of the tongue as tolerated. Hold the spoon and let your baby "suckle" the puree off of the spoon. This will support her tongue to produce the tongue patterns for easy swallowing. It will also reduce the mess of "recycling" in which half of the puree is pushed out by the tongue protrusion reflex. This spoon-feeding technique will encourage activation of the top lip to help with spoon clearance. Top lip movement for spoon clearance and top lip movement used to say "mama" are the same movements.

Remember spoon-feeding is a time for food exploration. Messy is good. Place a dab of the puree on the tray when your baby is no longer interested in spoon-feeding. Allow her to "finger paint" and become familiar with the texture.

It is recommended to introduce only one new food at a time and continue to offer it for at least 3 days to look for any reactions or suspected food allergies. Initially you will only want to offer 1-2 teaspoons at a time but, once your baby becomes accustomed to spoon-feeding, you can offer larger volumes and eventually offer 3 mealtimes per day.

Generally, it is not recommended to delay the introduction of puree beyond 6 months of age unless there is a strong medical reason. Even an exclusively breast-fed baby would benefit from spoon-feeding experiences. Delaying spoon-feeding can miss the “window of opportunity” and result in significant complications.

When should I be concerned about my baby’s spoon-feeding skills? The following are red flags that most likely need consultation:

- Refusal to spoon feeding by 6 months of age
- Gagging, vomiting, choking or congestion during or after spoon feeding
- Stressful feeding
- Feeding refusals, head turning, batting at the spoon, crying, fussing
- Tongue protrusion during spoon feeding
- Refusal to allow the spoon to touch the tongue or the tongue retracts in response to spoon placement

Remember feeding your baby should always be a time of pure enjoyment for you and your baby. If you are stressed or your baby is stressed, seek help to avoid further complications or feeding disorders.

Please feel free to call us with questions at 919-877-9800.

Carolina
Pediatric
Dysphagia