

## My baby isn't a good eater

It's common for parents (and grandparents) to worry because their baby is 'not eating well', especially as the baby gets older, since parents are often told that he or she should be eating a full family diet by their first birthday. But is 'not eating well' really a problem for the baby?

### What's normal?

BLW babies follow their own patterns when starting solid food. For example, your baby may:

- Set off enthusiastically, munching on everything in sight, gradually swallowing more and more of it and never looking back. (Probably the least common pattern.)
- Progress slowly but steadily through looking, experimenting, licking and tasting, and then eating, gradually increasing the amount she consumes.
- Eat almost nothing for weeks or months (with or without being keen to touch and taste) and then suddenly show enthusiasm for food.
- Set off enthusiastically and then seem to lose interest in food altogether.

None of these patterns suggests a problem. Most BLW babies don't eat significant amounts of solid food until they reach 8 or 9 months, and some not until after their first birthday. Those who start off enthusiastically and then lose interest simply enjoy the novelty of food more than those who start more slowly. When that wears off, they slow down for a while. [Note, though, that if a baby of 6-8 months shows no interest in picking up food *or any other objects* (such as toys or keys) and exploring them with her mouth it's possible there's an underlying reason, such as delayed development, so she should be checked by a doctor.]

A normally developing, healthy baby who appears to be 'not eating well' is probably just eating less than his parents or others think he should. In the second half of their first year the only nutrients most babies begin to need in addition to breastmilk are tiny amounts of iron and zinc. A few licks or bites (not mouthfuls!) each day from foods rich in these minerals, such as meat and eggs, is almost certainly enough to provide this. Babies don't starve themselves – if they are hungry, they will eat. The problem is that our expectations of how much babies should eat tends to be based on the amounts they eat when they're spoon fed. *But ...*

- Spoon feeding (by someone else) is not a natural part of babies' development. It just became the usual method of feeding when it was thought babies needed solid food before they were old enough to feed themselves.
- Spoon feeding and purees make it difficult for babies to follow their appetite. They tend to swallow mouthfuls faster and end up eating more than they really need.
- Pureed food contains a lot of liquid – so it may look like more food than it really is.
- Pressuring a baby to eat certain foods, or more than they want, can lead to problems such as picky eating or food refusal.
- Breastmilk (or formula) can continue to provide most of a baby's nourishment well beyond one year (see [www.rapleyweaning.com/assets/Breastmilk\\_vs\\_solids.pdf](http://www.rapleyweaning.com/assets/Breastmilk_vs_solids.pdf)).

If you think your baby is a 'poor eater', the solution is not to try to change what the baby is doing but to redefine what you think makes a *good* eater. A good eater is a baby who:

- responds to his own appetite (eating when he's hungry, stopping when he's had enough)
- drinks as much breastmilk or formula as he needs
- has the opportunity to try lots of different foods, without any pressure
- can choose the nutrients he needs (from healthy food offered)
- is interested in exploring food and practising self-feeding skills
- enjoys mealtimes

If your baby does all of these things, he's a good eater – even if he doesn't actually swallow very much at all!

### **What should I do?**

- Continue to offer breastfeeds or formula whenever your baby wants. Restricting milk feeds (as parents are sometimes advised to do in the hope the baby will eat more solid food) is likely to mean less nourishment not more (see [www.rapleyweaning.com/assets/Breastmilk\\_vs\\_solids.pdf](http://www.rapleyweaning.com/assets/Breastmilk_vs_solids.pdf)).
- Continue to share mealtimes with your baby, giving her the opportunity to explore and taste a range of healthy foods
- If your baby is over 10 months, don't keep giving her back food that has been deliberately thrown on the floor – this is her way of saying "No thanks" (see [http://www.rapleyweaning.com/assets/Throwing\\_food.pdf](http://www.rapleyweaning.com/assets/Throwing_food.pdf)).
- Try offering foods in smaller pieces, or introducing cutlery. Some babies get bored with being treated as newbies and want to practise more advanced skills!
- Don't make a fuss if your baby doesn't seem to like something – just carry on offering some of whatever you are eating. (Some babies persistently avoid certain foods and are later found to be allergic to them, so it may be wise to trust your baby.)
- Remember that it's normal for a baby who is unsettled for some reason (starting nursery for example) or becoming unwell, to go off solid food for a while and want more milk.

Baby-led weaning is about nurturing a good relationship with food, not about persuading babies to eat what we think they should. All babies spontaneously move on to other foods in their own time. As a parent, all you need to do is make food available, within reach, and to act as a role model by including the baby in your own mealtimes. Your baby will take care of everything else.