

Sitting upright – what does it mean?

'Able to sit upright' is recognised as one of the key signs of readiness for solid foods, and especially for BLW. But what does it mean and why does it matter? Let's start with why it matters ...

Why does sitting upright matter?

- **Readiness:** If your baby can't yet sit upright, that's a fairly good sign that his wider development hasn't reached the point of readiness, either. Chewing skills and digestive abilities tend to develop at the same pace as a baby's ability to sit upright. If your baby is offered food before he's developmentally ready to manage it, his gut may be exposed to food too soon and he will be more at risk of choking.
- **Safety:** Babies need to be upright to coordinate swallowing and breathing easily. They can't do this if they're slumped forwards or sideways. They also need to be able to control food inside their mouth so that it doesn't slip backwards, towards their airway, before it's ready to be swallowed. A leaning-back position makes this very tricky – and therefore dangerous. Imagine lying back to eat, or trying to chew with your chin on your chest, to see how uncomfortable and unsafe these positions would be.
- **Self-feeding:** Babies need to be able to lean forward to reach food, pick it up with both hands, and look around – all without losing their balance. To do this they must be stable in an upright position.

What is 'upright'?

Definitions of 'upright' depend on a baby's developmental stage. This can be confusing when you're looking for the one that means your baby is ready to start BLW:

1. **From birth** a baby can be held in an upright position if the whole of her trunk and spine is supported, but she can't do it alone.
2. **Sometime after 5 months** babies start to be able to hold their head and trunk erect if they are supported around the hips.
3. **By 7 to 8 months** most babies are able to stay in a sitting position for a minute or so on the floor, with no support.
4. **By 8 to 9 months** babies are starting to be able to *get into* a sitting position from a lying down or crawling position.

What matters for safe eating, and for BLW, is that your baby **can support her head and trunk in an upright position for long enough to explore some food** – and to eat it, if she's ready. If she needs a bit of support around her hips to do this, that's fine. There's no need to wait until she can stay upright with no support at all, or until she can get herself *into* a sitting position – and there's no '60-second rule', as some believe. It's the position and balance *above* her pelvis that she needs to be able to maintain. **A normally developing baby will be able to sit upright well enough to allow her to handle food and eat safely by six months or soon after.**

Stability matters, too

Self-feeding is about balance as well as muscular strength. Imagine sitting on a tall bar stool with your legs dangling. If you reached across to something on the bar with one hand, you would need to steady yourself with your other hand. And it would be hard not to wobble if you needed both hands to pick up what you were reaching for. Now imagine you had a foot rest, or something to steady you around your hips: how different would that feel? Your baby needs this level of stability if he is to get the most out of BLW.

How to help your baby to sit comfortably and safely

There are several options for helping to make exploring food easy and safe for your baby:

- Sit him on your lap, facing the table, and support his hips with a hand on either side of his bottom (not around his waist, which will restrict his movement). Many babies like the reassurance of this closeness at their first few meals.
- For picnics, or eating on the floor, sit your baby between your legs, facing forwards. This allows you to have both hands free while also providing the support he needs.
- If your baby is happy in a high chair, then a rolled-up towel around his hips can fill the space between his bottom and the sides of the chair. If the seat is slippery a small towel between his legs will help to stop him sliding forward.
- Older babies, and toddlers, are likely to find a foot rest helpful. (Worth remembering when buying a high chair!)

So, your baby is ready to get started with baby-led weaning as soon as he is able to sit upright securely and stably enough to handle food safely and effectively – with a little bit of support from you if he needs it.

Gill Rapley, October 2017