

Baby-led weaning is feasible but could cause nutritional problems for minority of infants

January 12 2011

Most babies can reach out for and eat finger food by six to eight months, according to a study in the January issue of *Maternal and Child Nutrition*.

However baby-led weaning - which advocates babies feeding themselves solid foods, rather than being spoon fed purees - could lead to nutritional problems for the small number of [children](#) who develop later than average.

That is why UK researchers - led by child health specialist Professor Charlotte M Wright from the University of Glasgow, Scotland - recommend combining self-feeding with solid finger food with traditional spoon feeding.

The research team used data from the Gateshead Millennium Study in north-east England, which provided information on when 602 children first reached out for food and other developments such as walking unaided and meaningful speech. Food diaries provided further information on 447 children, documenting the first five occasions they reached out for food.

By six months, 56 per cent of the babies were reaching out for food and 40 per cent were eating it - these figures had risen to 94 per cent and 90 per cent at eight months. After one year, only one baby covered by the study was not eating finger food.

"We also found clear parallels between the age at which babies reached out for food, walked unaided and spoke meaningful words" says Professor Wright from the University's Paediatric, Epidemiology and Community Health Unit.

"However, this does not suggest that providing babies with finger food at an early stage influences the speed at which they reach other key development milestones. It merely demonstrates that some babies develop a range of new skills earlier, or later, than others."

"There has always been a lot of debate about when babies should be weaned onto solids and the World Health Organization currently suggests six months" says Professor Wright. "The debate has now moved on to how babies should be weaned and, while some experts advocate babies being spoon-fed pureed solids, others support the baby-weaning approach, with [babies](#) being offered solid finger foods and encouraged to feed themselves from the outset.

"Baby-led weaning has already proved popular with parents, but there has been little formal research into its benefits and disadvantages."

Other key findings of the study included:

- Infants who had reached out for food at six months were more likely to be walking unaided at one year than those who had not (54 per cent of the 602 children, versus 38 per cent).
- They were also more likely to be speaking meaningfully at one year. For example, 68 per cent of the children who reached out for finger foods between four and five months were speaking, compared with 43 per cent of those who reached out at seven to eight months.

- The most common finger foods were bread, rusks or biscuits but by the fifth occasion, 20 per cent were eating fruit or vegetables. Only two per cent were eating meat with their fingers and five per cent were eating confectionery.
- 40 per cent of the children covered by the food diaries had eaten finger food by six months and 90 per cent by eight months. The average age at which children ate their first finger food was 6.35 months.
- By eight months, just over 90 per cent of the infants were having daily finger foods, but 35 per cent of parents still felt that their children needed to be fully fed at meal times. This suggests that parents didn't make finger food an integral part of meals or regard them as particularly important.

"Our findings suggest that baby-led weaning may be feasible for most infants, but could lead to nutritional problems for the small number of children - six per cent in our study - who develop more slowly" says Professor Wright. "We feel that it is more realistic to encourage infants to self-feed with solid finger food during family meals, but also give them spoon fed purees."

More information: Is baby-led weaning feasible? When do babies first reach out for and eat finger foods? Wright et al. *Maternal & Child Nutrition*. 7, pp 27-33. (January 2011). [DOI: 10.1111/j.1740-8709.2010.00274.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-8709.2010.00274.x)

Provided by Wiley

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