When should babies transition from milk feeds to snacks?

A practical guide for early years educators

Supporting babies through weaning can raise lots of questions for early years educators, particularly around milk feeds and when they should naturally begin to reduce and be replaced with food-based snacks. Every baby progresses differently, so it's important to approach feeding with flexibility and responsiveness meeting the needs of each child.

This guide outlines how milk intake may change across the first year and how early years settings can support babies in a responsive and developmentally appropriate way.

Milk remains important throughout the first year

During the first year of life, breastmilk or infant formula continues to play an important nutritional role alongside solid foods. As babies become more confident and capable eaters, solid food gradually takes on a bigger role, but this transition happens at different rates for different children and is largely guided by the baby.

Current NHS guidance advises that food-based snacks are not needed for babies under 12 months. Instead, milk feeds should be offered on demand between meals.

At the start of weaning (Around 6 months)

When babies first begin weaning, milk feeds should not reduce.

At this stage:

- **Solid foods are offered alongside usual milk feeds**
- **Babies are still growing rapidly and rely heavily on milk for energy and nutrients**
- **Early tastes and small spoonfuls are about learning, exploration and exposure rather than replacing feeds**

A few spoonfuls of vegetables or soft foods are valuable for sensory learning and developing feeding skills, but they do not provide enough energy or nutrition to replace an entire milk feed.

As babies become more established on Solids

As babies begin taking larger portions, increasing variety and progressing towards 2 then 3 meals per day, milk intake may begin to reduce naturally at one or more feeds but this process should be led by the baby and it is still important to offer milk feeds on demand between meals.

Milk remains an important source of:

Energy

Fat

Protein

Key vitamins and minerals

At this stage, milk feeds can be thought of as important 'mini meals' or nutritional top-ups between mealtimes. There is no single correct volume or schedule that suits every baby. It is best to have regular communication with parents and families to learn how the milk feeding routine is changing at home and help ensure feeding approaches remain supportive, individualised and responsive to the child's needs.

When babies are established on 3 meals per day

As solid food becomes a more significant part of the diet and babies are becoming more confident and capable eaters, milk feeds may naturally reduce.

However:

- **Milk is still nutritionally valuable throughout the first year**
- **It is important to continue to offer milk between meals. Remember, babies don't need snacks until after 12 months – instead think of milk feeds as important 'snacks' between solid food meals.**
- **The timing of dropped feeds varies widely between babies**

Some babies reduce milk intake quickly, while others continue taking frequent feeds alongside good food intake. It is important to have open and regular communication with parents and carers to understand what suits each baby best. Encourage parents to observe their baby's appetite, feeding skills and overall progression rather than focusing on rigid milestones.

From 12 Months Onwards

After 12 months, solid food should gradually become the main source of nutrition.

A useful guide at this age is to aim for:

- 3 main meals daily (breakfast, lunch and tea)
- 2–3 healthy snacks (mid-morning snack, mid-afternoon snack and before bed snack/milk)
- Milk intake reducing to around 300–400ml per day, this includes any milk used on breakfast cereal.
- Whole cow's milk can be offered as a drink instead of breast or formula milk if the family wish to. It's best to discuss the transition to cow's milk with each family.
- For children following a dairy-free diet, it is generally recommended to continue breastmilk or formula milk until around 18–24 months before transitioning to an unsweetened, fortified plant-based alternative. This is because many plant-based drinks are naturally lower in energy, fat and protein compared with whole cow's milk, which are important nutrients for young children's growth and development.
- From 12 months onwards, aim to offer all drinks including milk drinks from an open cup or free flow beaker instead of a bottle to protect teeth health.

Remember...

Babies are not all expected to progress at the same pace. Feeding development is influenced by appetite, temperament, feeding experience, developmental readiness and family routines.

Weaning is a gradual transition rather than a sudden switch from milk to meals. For many babies, the balance between milk and food evolves naturally over time when feeding is approached responsively and without pressure.

Early years educators play an important role in supporting positive feeding experiences, respecting individual differences and helping babies build confidence with food at their own pace.

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