

Promoting healthy nutrition for babies and toddlers



This Good Practice Point aligns to the NMC 2022 Standards of Proficiency for SCPHN Health Visitors – in particular: Sphere of Influence D: Population health: enabling, supporting and improving health outcomes of people across the life course. See the [Nursing and Midwifery Council website](#) for more details.

Nutrition impacts health, wellbeing, life chances and health inequalities across the lifespan¹. Health visitors (HVs) are ideally placed to support families with understanding the vital role of healthy nutrition across the lifespan. HVs can connect families to information, resources or services – including the Healthy Start Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Best Start Foods in Scotland and referral pathways for cost-of-living support - which may enable families to improve their food choices and therefore the quality of their diets.

This GPP will set how HVs and skill mix teams can support families with providing their babies and toddlers a healthy diet.

Breastfeeding*

Breastfeeding contributes to the health of both mother and baby, in the short and long term. The recommendations of all UK health departments are informed by those set out in the World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding².

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN)^{3,4} and the NHS⁵ recommend:

- exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life; and
- introduction of nutritionally adequate and safe complementary (solid) foods at around 6 months, together with continued breastfeeding into the second year of life or beyond.

Advise parents who are breastfeeding to take a vitamin D supplement. It is also recommended that babies taking less than 500mls of infant formula are given a daily supplement of vitamin D. For more information, see our GPP Advocating the use of Vitamin D - [bit.ly/41Mr0Yj](https://www.ihv.org.uk/gpp/41Mr0Yj).

Parents do not need a special diet while breastfeeding, but some foods and drinks are best avoided or limited while breastfeeding⁶. For more information please see [bit.ly/4eKCQr6](https://www.ihv.org.uk/gpp/4eKCQr6).

Combination feeding

Combination feeding (otherwise known as mixed feeding or partial breastfeeding) is where breastfed babies are also offered infant formula milk or where infant formula is offered in place of one or more breastfeeds. Research suggests combination feeding may be chosen for a number of reasons such as maternal fatigue, paternal/ same-sex co-parent bonding, settling the baby for longer periods, worries around weight gain, anxiety around lack of breastmilk or discomfort of feeding in public, as well as returning to work⁷. Parents can be supported to acknowledge their positive achievements with breastfeeding. Support can also include discussions about maximising any breastmilk offered, keeping infant formula to a minimum where possible, and advice about expressing and night-time feeding. Families who are offering breastmilk and infant formula can be supported to do so safely and in a way that continues to build close and loving relationships.

For further information, see NHS advice *How to combine breast and bottle feeding* - [bit.ly/41GTzpV](https://www.ihv.org.uk/gpp/41GTzpV).

[More information on page 2](#)

For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was created on 04/10/2024

Whilst we take every care to ensure the content of iHV resources are accurate and peer-reviewed at time of publication, evidence may change over time and advice needs to be tailored to individual circumstances. The inclusion of references, content or website links to external organisations does not imply any endorsement of the organisation, or their materials, by the iHV.

The iHV does not warrant or guarantee the accuracy or completeness of the information in this resource and cannot accept liability for its use.

Therefore, please always exercise your own judgement. For further information, please contact us: info@ihv.org.uk

Formula feeding

In the UK, the only recommended alternative to breastmilk in the first year of life is an infant formula labelled as suitable for use from birth⁷. Follow-on formula is marketed for use from 6 months of age and is unnecessary, there is “*no published evidence that the use of any follow-on formulas offer any nutritional or health advantage over the use of whey-based infant formula among infants artificially fed*”⁸. Follow-on milks should never be given to babies under 6 months of age⁹. It is important that all families who use infant formula are aware of the importance of making up feeds correctly, particularly not over-concentrating feeds with a ‘generous scoop’ or diluting feeds to make the powder last longer⁹. For more information see bit.ly/3R8vcOE.

Responsive Feeding

Responsive feeding is associated with healthy weight gain during infancy and has been identified as having a protective effect in the prevention of overweight and obesity in childhood. Responsive feeding occurs when the caregiver recognises and responds to infant cues in a timely and developmentally appropriate manner. Understanding cues is something that can be used throughout childhood to enable responsive feeding at all ages.

For more information on responsive feeding see:

- Better Health Start for Life – Responsive feeding - bit.ly/4elyq9R
- Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative
 - » Overweight and obesity infant health research - bit.ly/4e0HEZy
 - » Responsive bottle feeding - bit.ly/4dWwDs1

Introducing solid foods and eating well in the first year

The introduction of solid foods or infant formula before 6 months of age reduces the amount of breastmilk consumed and is associated with a greater risk of infectious illness in infants, gastrointestinal issues and allergies³. SACN advises that the appropriate age for the introduction of solids is around 6 months. At this age, most infants are developmentally ready to actively accept solid food, and foods other than breastmilk (or infant formula) are required to meet their nutritional needs. Signs that a baby may be ready for solid foods include when a baby can¹⁰:

1. Stay in a sitting position and hold their head steady.
2. Coordinate their eyes, hand and mouth so that they can look at the food, pick it up and put it in their mouth all by themselves.
3. Swallow food (not just put it in the mouth for it to come back out again).

Every baby is an individual and may be ready for the introduction of solids food at different times, particularly if born preterm. However, the signs of readiness are the same¹¹. Bliss has developed a weaning guide to help parents to introduce solid foods to their preterm baby. See bit.ly/3OF795f.

It is recommended that a wide range of foods be offered from 6 months including meat, fish, pulses, starchy foods, and fruit and vegetables. Parents are advised to avoid foods with added sugar and salt, as well as any foods or drinks designed for older children or adults. SACN advises that commercial infant and toddler foods are unnecessary and may contribute high levels of free sugar to the diet¹². First Steps Nutrition has a guide on eating well in the first year of life bit.ly/3IQf1OS. For more information about complementary feeding and introducing solids, see iHV’s Good Practice Point Complementary feeding and baby-led weaning - bit.ly/3Hkocqm.

More information on page 3

Eating well for 1-4 year-olds

Between the ages of 1 and 4 years, children require a nutritionally balanced diet and support to establish good eating patterns. The UK Government recommends that all children aged 6 months to 5 years are offered a daily vitamin supplement containing vitamins A, C and D. Remember to discuss Healthy Start or Best Start eligibility with all families.

The consumption of larger portion sizes has been implicated in the increased prevalence of childhood obesity¹³. First Steps Nutrition Trust has a helpful resource to understand appropriate portion sizes for 1-4 year-olds - bit.ly/4elyXsn. Due to their universal reach, HVs and skill mix teams can support families to eat well and support healthy growth and development thereby reducing the risk of experiencing overweight and obesity. With evidence indicating that 90% of 3-year-olds with obesity go on to experience overweight or obese in adolescence, the preventative role of health visiting is essential in reducing this health inequality.

The Eatwell Guide is a useful tool to support healthy family eating and is suitable for everyone over the age of 2 years. It provides a visual reference for how much of each food group is recommended during a meal¹⁴, for more information see:

- Eat Well Guide - bit.ly/3XEbEVm
- First Steps Nutrition Trust, eating well in the early years - bit.ly/3ulxfUf

Oral health

Dental decay is a key public health issue for children. It is advised to limit or reduce the frequency and amount of sugary food and drinks offered to children¹⁵. Where bottles are used, it is recommended that only milk or water is given, and babies are weaned off the bottle by 6 months. This allows time to transition to using a cup/free-flow beaker by 1 year. Discuss oral health and advise that teeth brushing is the last activity before sleep, to prevent sugar from sitting on the teeth overnight, and reduce dental decay. Connect parents with the British Society for Paediatric Dentistry website (bit.ly/36otkMD), for more advice about children's oral health. For more information see iHV's Good Practice Point, Oral Health for babies and children - bit.ly/3tCLOF5.

Further information

Nutrition

- Broken plate report 2023
 - » Full report - bit.ly/3vokuL3
 - » At a Glance Report - bit.ly/3vokuL3
 - » Broken Plate Animation: bit.ly/4gnxabc4
- England - NHS Better Health Start for Life - bit.ly/48C8Me7
- Wales - Healthy Eating for Children Aged 1 to 4 years - bit.ly/3ZjyNNW
- Scotland - Healthy eating - bit.ly/3ZmAPgA
- Northern Ireland - Healthy eating for children - bit.ly/3oyVYQL

Oral Health

- England - Looking after your baby's teeth - bit.ly/339yMle
- Scotland - Childsmile - bit.ly/3ToUUz4
- Wales - Designed to Smile: improving children's dental health - bit.ly/4cLZkXe
- Northern Ireland - Northern Ireland Children's Oral Health Improvement Plan - bit.ly/3zfFI08

[More information on page 4](#)

The Institute of Health Visiting has adopted an additive approach to the language that we use. This approach aims to add and not take away – and is in line with NHS England guidance and the UK-wide inclusivity statement jointly issued by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) and the Royal College of Midwives. It preserves women/men-centred language as well as including language for those who identify in other ways. Families are diverse and we will strive to ensure that everyone is represented and feels included.

**We refer to breastfeeding and breastmilk but recognise terms such as chestfeeding, bodyfeeding, nursing, lactation, or providing human milk may be more preferable for and accurate to some of the families we support.*

References

1. The World Health Organization. Healthy Diet. 2020 [accessed 28 July 2023] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3RWXLPg>
2. WHO and UNICEF. Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding. 2003 [accessed 18 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3THGE5s>
3. Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. Feeding in the first year of life. 2018 [accessed 28 July 2023] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3wiWJAV>
4. Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years – full report. 2023 [accessed 18 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/4d16tTO>
5. NHS. Your breastfeeding questions answered. 2023 [accessed 18 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/41HWyyl>
6. First Steps Nutrition Trust Eating well for new mums including information for breastfeeding mothers. 2020 [accessed 18 September 2024] available at: <https://bit.ly/3lQf1OS>
7. NHS Types of Formula. 2023 [accessed 18 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/41DCrS2>
8. First Steps Nutrition Trust Follow-on formula. 2020 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3Zm8syW>
9. UNICEF A guide to infant formula for parents who are bottle feeding health professionals' guide. 2016 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ziy4lF>
10. NHS. Your baby's first solid foods. 2022 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/35N5Eky>
11. Bliss. Weaning your premature baby. 2023 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3OF795f>
12. Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years. 2023 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3S1HWXH>
13. Independent Report by CMO Professor Dame Sally Davies Time to Solve Childhood Obesity. 2019 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/4dZxOqK>
14. GOV.UK. The Office For Health Improvements and Disparities. The Eatwell Guide. 2024 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/4emS71n>
15. British Society of Paediatric Dentistry A practical guide to children's teeth. 2016 [accessed 19 September 2024] Available at: <https://bit.ly/4d177kc>

Author:

Louisa Clifford-Taylor, RM, RHV
Research Associate, Institute of Health Visiting